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ANITA GOLDSTEIN
Publishers

CHARLES E. FRITCH
Editor

ROMELLE GLASS
Art Director

LINDA HAMMOND
Graphic Artist

LEO MARGULIES
Founder

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MIDNIGHT WIND by Brett Halliday

A beautiful girl. A secluded motel. For Mike Shayne it promised to be an interesting evening — until a corpse and a killer showed up to complicate matters! 6

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Mike Shayne Mystery Makers

MAX F. HARRIS (*Postponement*) says:

> I graduated from the University of North Carolina in the late 40's and have since been in some sort of journalism, advertising or research in Chicago or North Carolina, all the time interested in the more elusive principles of creative writing. I still write a newspaper column in my hometown of Monroe, N.C., but put most time on novels and short stories. I have appeared in such widely differing books as THE GEORGIA REVIEW, GAMBLING TIMES and THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION. Two mystery novels are due to appear in 1981.

DIANE CHAPMAN (*The Diamond Ring*) tells us:

> I can't imagine that even a carefully-winnowed selection of autobiographical tidbits would be fascinating to anyone. But thank you for the invitation. (My standard bio line runs: "Diane Chapman is a prize-winning, internationally published poet. She is listed in the *International Who's Who of Poetry* and the *World's Who's Who of Women* and teaches creative writing and journalism at Phoenix College." Far too academic and prissy-sounding, I think, for the occasion,

though I consider myself neither a scholar nor a prig).

MICHAEL FOWLER (*Cody's Glance*) writes:

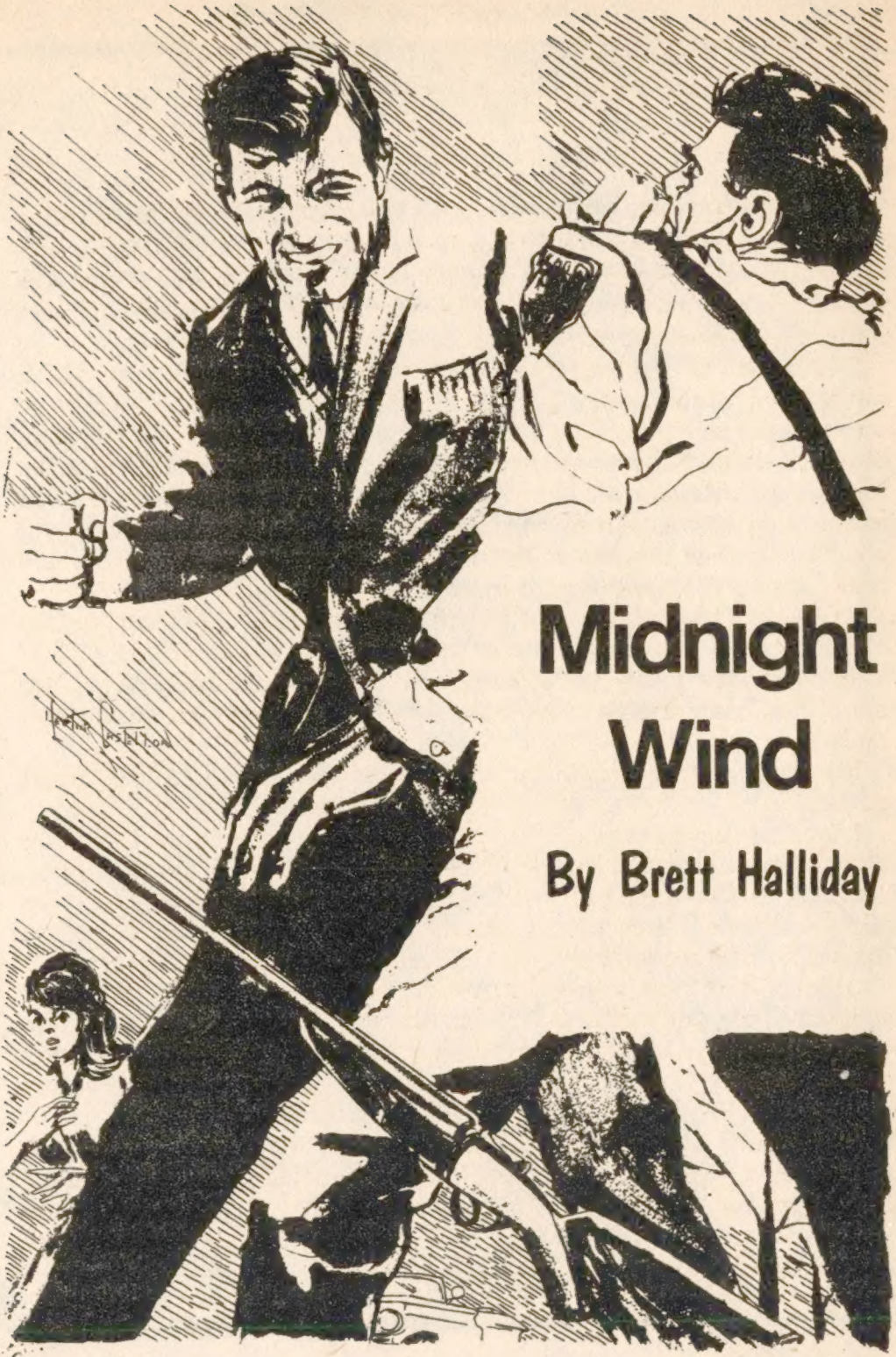
I am 31, and for the past two years have worked as a clerk and food stamp cashier for the welfare department in Cincinnati. My hobbies include golf, reading and writing short stories, postal chess, and humming along with my refrigerator. "Cody's Glance" is my first story acceptance.

W. L. FIELDHOUSE *(Ape Murder)*

is of course the author of the justly popular Major Lansing of the CID novelets which have been appearing regularly in MSMM, the latest of which is in this issue. Several others are warming up in our inventory. His western novel, KLAW, has expanded to a series (which he's writing) at Tower Publications. In addition, Pinnacle Books is currently publishing the SIXGUN SAMURAI series written by him and two other writers, under the pen name of Patrick Lee.

PATRICK SCAFFETTI (*Death Payments*) says:

For the past ten years I've taught a variety of subjects at both the junior and senior high school levels. I hold a bachelor's degree in English Literature and a master's degree in English Education. I'm a member of the Mystery Writers of America, an omnivorous reader, and a lover of old movies and antique books. Thirty-one years old, I'm married to a freelance writer. I'm also the father of a four-year-old daughter named Katie. I sold my first mystery story in 1976, and since then I've become addicted to writing within the crime/suspense framework. Whatever time I can spare from teaching, writing, and family concerns I devote to restoring antique furniture and playing golf. ●



Midnight Wind

By Brett Halliday

The midnight wind blows ever the same for warriors, lovers, assassins, and fools . . . .

Ling Yuan

THE BREEZE BLEW GENTLY FROM THE EAST, lazily stirring the leafy fronds of the palm trees along Biscayne Boulevard. The waters of the Bay were lapping softly on the beaches. The lambent glow of the moon shone on the waves and the sand, and in the pale light, it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began.

Traffic on the boulevard was light. It was the middle of the night, and Miami was sleeping. Across the Bay, the bright lights still glittered, the music played, the glasses clinked, and the voices laughed. Some of the laughs were strident, forced, almost angry, but what the tourists were doing over in Miami Beach was of no concern to the few people who were awake and moving around on *this* side of the Bay. An occasional prowl car with two of Chief Will Gentry's men inside would cruise down Biscayne Boulevard and then turn onto Flagler Street. There were a few lights on in the buildings that lined the street, as all-night cleaning crews worked their way through the shops and offices. There was little to be heard, except for an infrequent strain of Latin music that came from a radio somewhere in an office with the window open.

But calm can be an illusion, a facade to be shattered like brittle glass . . . .

It was turning from an old day into a new one, and the cleaning crew in an older building on Flagler Street was well above the second floor. The only person in the lower part of the building was Alex Bellamy, the night watchman, and he was meandering casually up and down the hallways of the second floor, sucking at a piece of butterscotch candy.

At least Alex *thought* he was the only one there. He hadn't heard or seen anything unusual tonight, and that was the way he liked it. He was fifty-eight years old, with thinning hair, bad feet, and a back that had a tendency to go out on him at the worst times, a legacy of years on the docks before he had landed this cushy watchman's job.

They called him a security guard, but he had always thought of himself as a night watchman. Alex liked night work. The day didn't hold much for him, what with his wife gone and the kids grown and moved away. It was quiet at night, and he didn't have to deal with a lot of people. There was one tenant who was pretty unreliable in his comings and goings, but all of the other people who rented offices in the building were pretty regular in their routines, and Alex rarely saw

them. Thinking about that one other tenant brought a frown of disapproval to Alex's seamed face. His aching feet turned a corner, and he started down a corridor where the walls echoed his steps back hollowly.

INSIDE ONE OF THE OFFICES, A SHADOW MOVED. It stretched out, long and grotesque, across the floor. In absolute silence, it went from a desk to a filing cabinet. A moment's pause, during which only the keenest ear would have heard the drawers of the cabinet opening and the riffling of papers. There was a tiny glow that floated in the air, like a miniscule firefly on a hot August night, and the dim illumination moved over the papers rapidly.

The ghostly light was reflected back from the whiteness of the papers, revealing the saffron hue of the hand that held the flashlight with the shielded beam. The fingers were long, slender, and dexterous, and they replaced the papers and closed the cabinet with as little noise as they had made in opening it. The small light vanished abruptly, and a head turned slightly in the pitch blackness, as ears listened to soft footsteps coming down the hall.

There was no shadow now, no light to show it. But if there had been, the shadow would have been seen flitting to a second door into the room, opening it and slipping through. There was another desk in this second room, this one old and scarred. The movement in the darkness ceased beside this desk.

Alex Bellamy came to a stop outside the door of one of the offices. He sucked on his candy and glared at the writing on the pebbled glass of the door. He sighed and spoke aloud. "I'm damn glad you're out of town, mister. At least things are peaceful around here for a little while."

There was no reason for him to worry about talking to himself, Alex thought. Hell, it didn't count if there wasn't anybody around to hear it. Of course, if there had been somebody there, then he wouldn't have been talking to himself, would he? Alex thought about it, snorted, and started to turn away from the door, his fingers reaching out from habit to grasp the knob and try it.

It turned.

Alex stopped, looking down at the knob in surprise. It shouldn't have done that. The door was supposed to be locked, and he couldn't believe that the pretty secretary would go off and leave it unlocked. It was a warm night in Miami, but that wasn't the reason beads of sweat popped out on Alex's forehead as he reached down and slipped the heavy pistol out of its holster.

HE PUSHED THE DOOR OPEN SLOWLY, THEN PAUSED to listen. His ears could detect no sound coming from inside. He tucked the piece of hard candy in his cheek and stepped forward, through the open door and just into the darkness beyond. He called out quietly, "Anybody in here? Listen, I've got a gun; you'd better come out." Awkwardly, he reached across his body with his left hand, searching for the light switch.

Just as his groping fingers found it and flipped it up, Alex heard the sound. It was a rustle of cloth, and then a sudden, ear-numbing cry resounded through the office. Alex gasped as the lights came on and showed him what was about to happen to him.

The man came flying out of the inner office, leaving his feet as he launched a devastating kick. Alex saw him only as a blur, not even having time to notice the well-tailored suit, the sleek dark hair, the unusual color of his skin. The piece of candy slipped down from the hollow of Alex's cheek as the watchman's face went slack with shock. It clicked against his teeth, and then the intruder's expensively-shod foot crashed into Alex's jaw, snapping his head back savagely. Alex had started to bring his gun up, his finger had started to press the trigger, but then the nerves weren't working anymore, and Alex was flying backwards into the corridor, his head flopping unnaturally on his shoulders. There had been a bright light in his brain at the moment of impact, and then nothing, and he never felt it as he slammed into the opposite wall of the corridor and fell limply to the floor.

The killer moved quickly, stepping into the hall and lifting the two hundred pounds of the dead man as if it was nothing. He carried his victim back into the office and dropped him on the floor, then switched off the light, hoping there had been no one else around to see it. He did not wish to kill again. To bring death to anyone but the man he sought was a waste of his energy.

The One he served would not like this. Only one man was supposed to die. The killer went back into the inner office, searching the desk rapidly and thoroughly. He found what he was looking for there, in a notation that the man who used this office had made to himself more than two weeks before. It was the second step on the trail, though, the trail to honor and vengeance.

There was still work to be done in this building, but soon the killer could leave this strange city and continue his mission, continue until he had reached the glorious conclusion of his quest.

And then the One he served would be pleased. The man who was sought would be dead, the man who had left his trail in this office where death had struck so suddenly, the man called Mike —

II

SHAYNE KEPT HIS RIGHT HAND ON THE WHEEL of the Buick and raised his left to rub at his eyes as he drove. The sun was glinting brightly off the water under the long causeway, and the glare wasn't helping the big private detective's headache.

He had left the small town of Gulf Stream, on Dragon Key, earlier in the afternoon, following nearly three weeks away from Miami. The first couple of days of that time had been spent wrapping up a particularly nasty case that had left him battered and wounded. His shoulder and leg still ached sometimes from the bullet wounds he had suffered. But efficient treatment in a naval hospital and long, lazy days in the sun had taken care of most of his aches and pains. The tender loving care of a certain lovely young blonde hadn't hurt, either.

But Shayne was ready to get back home now. He had always led an active life, and he got restless if he was out of harness for too long. His beautiful secretary, Lucy Hamilton, had been holding down the fort at his office in Miami. She had wanted to stay with him in the hospital, but he had been adamant about sending her and his other two friends, reporter Timothy Rourke and police chief Will Gentry, back home.

Shayne kept the accelerator pressed down, sending the big Buick down the sparsely-traveled highway at a good clip. He figured he would make Miami by nightfall. He liked the Keys, the little islands with their thick vegetation, linked by long causeways that spanned the glittering bays, but right now he was in no mood for appreciating their natural beauty.

As Shayne's car left one of the causeways and followed the highway onto a long, narrow Key, he spotted a car coming the other direction toward him. It was still several hundred yards away, but it was close enough that he could see the slight weaving from side to side that it was doing. It seemed to be staying in its own lane, but it was using all of it. Shayne eased up on the gas, slowing down until he could see what the other driver was going to do. His red brows drew down as the distance between the cars lessened.

Suddenly, when they were only fifty feet or so apart, Shayne involuntarily snapped aloud, "Watch out! That bottle — " His foot jabbed toward the brake pedal as the driver of the other car ignored a shattered beer bottle in the road and ran directly over the largest, sharpest piece.

Shayne saw the sudden dip of the front corner of the other car as the glass punctured a tire. The car swerved toward him in a skid as the tire blew. Shayne whipped the wheel of the Buick to the side, trying des-

perately to avoid the oncoming car.

It was too late. The two vehicles were too close together, and the other driver made no attempt to avoid Shayne. With a grinding crash, fenders banged together.

Shayne had his foot on the brake, bearing down on it and trying to slow as they collided. He felt the impact throwing him forward as he tightened his grip on the wheel . . .

His head cracked against the top of the wheel as his seat belt stopped him from going through the windshield. He ignored the sudden jolt, pushed the pain out of his mind, and fought the car back under control. It came to a shuddering stop on the side of the road. Shayne killed the engine instantly, in case gas was spilling, then jerked his belt loose and threw his door open.

The other car had spun around at least twice, sliding off the road and slamming into a stubby palm tree. Its front end was crumpled, and the damage to the smaller car looked to be a lot worse than what had happened to the Buick. Shayne saw the driver's head slumped back against the seat, motionless, and he broke into a run. He had spotted tendrils of smoke beginning to rise from under the ruined hood.

The driver was a woman, Shayne saw as he ran up to the wrecked car. He grabbed the door handle. It fought against him for a moment, then came open with a rasping sound. He reached inside, wrapped his long arms around the woman, and pulled her out as he saw flames begin to lick up around the engine.

In a stumbling run, he hurried away from the car, back toward his Buick. As he reached the highway, another car pulled up, and a startled middle-aged man stared from an open window out at the scene.

"Call the highway patrol," Shayne barked at him. "We may need an ambulance, too!" He trotted over to his car, carrying the woman, as the motorist sped off in search of a phone.

He had just placed the unconscious woman on the sandy shoulder when a loud whumping noise shook the air. Shayne looked over his shoulder and saw the blaze completely engulfing the compact car now. If he hadn't gotten the woman out . . . .

HE LEANED ON HIS CAR AND LOOKED DOWN AT HER. She was fairly young, in her late twenties or early thirties, with short-cropped dark hair. An expensive dress clung to a fine figure. Shayne knelt beside her and studied the attractive face. There didn't seem to be any wounds on it, and the only blood he could find anywhere on her had come from a long scratch on her forearm. She would probably have a few bruises — he knew he'd have one where he'd hit his head — but

overall, he thought they'd been remarkably lucky.

The woman's eyes flickered open as he looked at her, and he saw that they were a deep shade of sea green. She started up, and he put his hands on her shoulders to hold her down.

"Take it easy," Shayne said. "You look to be all right, but we'd better wait a few minutes to make sure."

"My car — " she gasped.

Shayne glanced at it again. The fire was still burning strongly. "I'm afraid it's totaled. Didn't you see that bottle you were about to hit? It blew one of your tires and sent you right into me."

She put her head back down and closed her eyes again. A moan came from her crimson lips, and Shayne thought he smelled alcohol. After a moment, with her eyes still closed, she asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Shayne grunted. "A few bumps and bruises, like you, but I've taken a lot worse. You've got a scratch on your arm that bled some, but I don't think it'll need stitches."

The whining of a siren in the distance told Shayne that the middle-aged man had succeeded in contacting the authorities. The woman insisted on getting to her feet, and he helped her as the Florida highway patrol car came speeding toward them.

The woman leaned a hip against the Buick for support, then said, "I'm Marlene Kensington. I — I am sorry about this. I didn't mean to — "

"What's done is done," Shayne said. "And your car was hurt a lot worse than mine. We'll tell the cops all about it, then let the insurance companies handle it from there, all right?"

Marlene Kensington nodded as the highway patrol car came to a stop behind Shayne's Buick. A young man in uniform hopped out from behind the wheel and hurried toward Shayne and Marlene. "Are you folks all right?" he asked anxiously. "I've got an ambulance on the way."

"I think we're both okay," Shayne said. "The lady's got a cut that the paramedics can look at, though."

The trooper took a glance at the wound on Marlene's arm and agreed with Shayne's assessment that it wasn't too bad. Marlene said, "It doesn't hurt much. I hope it won't leave a bad scar."

Shayne saw that the trooper's plastic name tag read *E.J. Reed,* and underneath that bore the legend *Lieutenant*. Reed asked, "Just what happened here?"

"I was northbound in this car," Shayne said, slapping the Buick's hood. "A tire on the lady's car blew out, and she lost control of it. I

tried to get out of the way. At least we didn't hit head-on. It was more of a glancing blow."

"That the way it happened?" Reed asked Marlene.

She nodded shakily. "It all happened so fast," she said. "I tried . . . it was just too fast."

"I understand," Reed nodded. "Could I see some identification?"

Shayne handed over his wallet while Marlene looked helpless and said, "My purse was in the car. You can see . . . " She waved a hand at the blackened, smoldering vehicle. "But my name is Marlene Kensington. The car is registered in my name, and if you can still make out the license plate, you can check that."

Reed had flipped to Shayne's driver's license, and right next to that was the photostat of his private investigator's license. He looked up at the big redhead and said, "You're Mike Shayne from Miami? The private eye?"

"Yeah," Shayne said. Reed looked impressed.

"I read about you solving the murder of that reporter. What are you doing down in our neck of the woods, Mr. Shayne, if you don't mind my asking?" He asked the question as he handed Shayne's wallet back.

Shayne knew there had been absolutely no publicity about the case that had brought him to Dragon Key, and he had instructions from national security agents to keep it that way. He said easily, "I've been down south of here on a little vacation. Been doing a little fishing." There was an ice chest of fish caught while he had been recuperating in the trunk to back up his story, should Reed check on it.

It was obvious Reed wasn't going to doubt him, though. The trooper pulled out his notebook and began writing down what Shayne and Marlene had told him about the accident, asking them a question from time to time.

THE AMBULANCE ARRIVED A FEW MOMENTS LATER. The attendants disinfected and bandaged the cut on Marlene's arm, recommended that both of them see their personal physicians and have X-rays as soon as possible, and then went on their way.

Shayne said to Marlene, "Listen, since your car won't be going anywhere under its own power, why don't I take you back to Miami with me?"

Marlene suddenly shook her head, and Shayne thought that if anything, she turned even paler than the shock of the wreck had made her. He frowned, then glanced at Lieutenant Reed, but the officer was still writing in his notebook and appeared not to have noticed the exchange.

He had heard it, though, because he said, "Look, Mr. Shayne, I don't want to inconvenience you, but I'd appreciate it if you and Ms. Kensington wouldn't go on into Miami today. I'm not going to issue a citation, since it looks like this was a pure accident, but I still have to have your statements typed up and file a report. I'd appreciate it if both of you would come into our district office tomorrow morning to finish things up. Okay?"

Shayne knew it was more of an order than a request, so he said, "I'll guess it'll have to be. You know of a place we can get some motel rooms around here?"

"But I don't have any money," Marlene protested. "It all burned up in my car."

"Don't worry about that," Shayne said. "Call it a loan."

He saw Marlene looking at him rather dubiously, but she nodded.

"The Rip Tide Motel's just a few miles up the road," Reed said, "at the end of this key. You know where our district office is, Mr. Shayne? On Land's End Key, about twenty miles north of here?"

"I've been there," Shayne said, nodding. "It's all right for us to go ahead?"

"Right," Reed said. He snapped his notebook closed. "Think your car will run all right?"

"We'll find out," Shayne said, opening the door.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, THEY WERE ON THEIR WAY northward. Marlene sat as far as she could away from Shayne on the front seat, and as he glanced over at her, his lips curled in a wry grin.

"I don't usually bite unless I'm invited to," he said dryly.

She tried to smile at him, but it didn't come off very well. "It's not that, Mr. Shayne. I'm just . . . Well, the accident shook me up a great deal, as you can imagine."

"Sure. But why didn't you want to go back to Miami?"

She gave him a long, searching look, then said, "You don't miss much, do you? Didn't that policeman say you were a private detective?"

Shayne nodded. "That's right. You *don't* want to go back to Miami, do you?"

"I never want to see Miami again. There's . . . there's nothing there for me, no reason I should go back. I was on my way to Key West to look for a job, so I wouldn't have to go back."

There was more tension in her voice than should have been there from the close call with the wreck. Shayne said gently, "Would you like to talk about it?"

"I don't think so," Marlene said shortly.

Shayne shrugged his brawny shoulders. "Excuse the question, then. It's something I'm in the habit of."

He drove silently for the next few minutes, a silence matched by Marlene. Then he spotted a sign up ahead, saw a cluster of buildings next to the highway, and said, "That looks like the place."

Shayne turned the Buick off the road, piloting it onto a gravel parking lot, past the faded, weatherbeaten sign that said WELCOME — RIP TIDE MOTEL — FRIENDLIEST PLACE IN THE FLORIDA KEYS.

III

SHAYNE BROUGHT THE BUICK TO A STOP in front of the main building. It was stucco, painted a not-too-attractive shade of pink, and beyond it were two rows of similar but smaller cabins, each one separated from the others by a covered parking space. Shayne didn't notice any other cars parked by any of the cabins. The only vehicle in sight was a station wagon parked next to the office.

Marlene sat in the car while Shayne went up to the screen door that led into the office. He opened it and stepped into a dimly-lit lobby with wilted potted plants in the corner. A broken-down sofa sat on one wall, and an old black-and-white console television was on another wall. Shayne saw that the picture was on, but the sound was either turned down or out of order. A long counter ran across the back of the room, and a bell sat on it. There was no one in sight.

Shayne hit the bell twice, and after a wait of a few seconds that seemed longer, a door behind the counter opened. A man in khakis hurried through it, a smile on his face and a fishing cap on his head.

"Yes, sir, what can I do for you?" he asked, in a voice that seemed too bright and cheerful for this dreary room. It had an artificial quality about it. Shayne could tell from the lines on the man's wind-burned face that he was in his fifties or sixties. White hair showed under the fishing cap.

"We need a couple of cabins," Shayne said.

The man looked out through the venetian blinds on the windows of the lobby at Marlene sitting in Shayne's car and said, "A *couple* of cabins?"

"That's right," Shayne said brusquely. "The lady and I just ran into each other, you might say."

The man nodded. "Whatever you want, mister, is more than all right with me. As you can see, we ain't doing just a booming bus-

iness." He slid two registration cards across the counter. "You just fill these out, and we'll fix you up."

As Shayne filled out the first card with his name, address, and other particulars, the man went on, "Name's Jesse Brewster. I own this place, though that's not so much of a brag as it once was. Most folks go further down the Keys and stay in the fancier places."

"This'll do fine for us," Shayne grunted. He put Marlene's name on the second card, then said, "The lady can give you the rest of this information later, can't she? I think she's pretty tired right now."

"Sure, sure," Brewster nodded. He reached under the counter and produced two keys. "You can have Cabins 3 and 4, the best in the place. Need any help with your luggage?"

"No, thanks, I can manage."

"Okay-doke. There's an ice machine right here by the office, and if you'd like, my daughter Cassie can cook you up some right nice steaks. That's extra, of course."

"Maybe later," Shayne said. He took his wallet out. "How much for the rooms?"

"Thirty bucks," Brewster said. "Check-out time is noon. All the rules are posted in the rooms. It's a pleasure having you nice folks with us."

Shayne smiled thinly and swung around, going back outside to the car. He saw Marlene looking at something to his right, and when he turned his head, he saw two young men lounging at the corner of the building. They both looked to be in their early twenties, and there was a family resemblance between them. The older one was the smaller of the two, with a lean face and sandy hair. His younger brother was several inches taller and probably fifty or sixty pounds heavier, with a broad, open face and hair that was so pale as to be almost white. Shayne thought the boy looked like he should be playing defensive tackle for the Dolphins.

Brewster had followed Shayne to the door of the office, and as he saw Shayne looking at the young men, he said proudly, "These here are my boys, Jeff and Lonnie. Say hello, boys."

The bigger, younger one just nodded pleasantly, and the older one said, "I'm Jeff, mister. You need anything, you just call down to the office and ask for me. Glad to have you with us."

Shayne said, "Right," and got back into the car, starting it and turning it toward the cabins. He said to Marlene, "This must be a family business. The old man said his daughter was the cook."

Marlene gave a tiny shudder which Shayne saw out of the corner of his eye. "Those boys kept watching me. I didn't like it."

"Probably they were just shocked that the motel has a couple of guests," Shayne grinned. "I don't imagine they do much business. Which cabin do you want, 3 or 4?"

"I don't suppose it matters. 3 will do fine."

Shayne parked the Buick in the space between Cabins 3 and 4, then got out and went around to open the door for Marlene. He handed her the key to Cabin 3 as she got out.

"If you need anything, I can run up to Land's End Key," he said. "There's a town there, I can pick up whatever — "

"Never mind, Mr. Shayne," Marlene said, going over to the door of her cabin and unlocking it. "This is only for one night; I'm sure I can manage. Then I guess it's back to my apartment in Miami, whether I like it or not."

"Just thought I'd offer," Shayne said, going over to his own door.

"Don't worry." Marlene smiled over at him, and he could see the bitterness behind the expression. "I'm used to checking into motels without any luggage." She went inside and shut the door.

SHAYNE GRIMACED AND WENT INTO HIS OWN CABIN. It was just like a thousand other motel rooms he had seen during his years as a detective. The carpet was threadbare, the bed would be lumpy and uncomfortable, and the tiny shower in the bathroom was just barely big enough to accommodate him. He went over to the air conditioner and flicked it on, then went back out to his car, leaving the door open for the moment so the stale air inside could circulate.

He got his suitcase from the back seat and carried it inside, putting in on the bed. There was a scarred-up dresser on one side of the room, and a telephone sat on it. There was no dial, though. Shayne found a glass in the bathroom, rinsed it as well as he could in the sink, then opened his suitcase. A grin spread over his face as he saw that the bottle of Martell nestled down inside his shirts had made it through the wreck unscathed. He splashed some of the liquor in the glass. Sipping it appreciatively, he leaned against the dresser and picked up the phone.

There was a buzzing in his ear for a moment, then a clicking as someone in the office lifted the receiver there. A girl's voice said, "Yes, can I help you?"

"I'd like to place a long-distance call to my office, and you can reverse the charges," Shayne said. He gave the girl, whom he assumed was Jesse Brewster's daughter Cassie, the number of his office and then waited as it rang a few seconds later.

A good feeling went through him as he heard Lucy Hamilton answer.

When the connection was made, he said, "Hello, Angel. It's me."

"Michael!" Lucy exclaimed. "Are you back? I wasn't expecting you until tonight."

"I wish I was back in Miami," Shayne said. "I've run into a little delay, though."

"It's not another case, is it?" Lucy asked anxiously. "I don't think you're up to handling another case just yet, Michael."

"Hold on," Shayne chuckled. "When I said I ran into something, I meant it. Or rather, something ran into me. I was in a car wreck."

He heard the sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line, and he forestalled Lucy's questions by hurrying on, "I'm fine, Angel, I wasn't hurt. But the highway patrol wants me to stay down here until they get all their reports and things filed tomorrow morning. So I should be back in town sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"Where are you now?" Lucy asked.

"At a little motel called the Rip Tide, about twenty miles south of Land's End Key. I don't even know the name of this little Key we're on, if it's got one."

"Well, what happened, Michael? How bad was the wreck?"

"Bad enough, but luckily, nobody was hurt very much. The lady in the other car got a cut on her arm, but that was all. And all I did was bang my head a little. The Buick's got a smashed fender. The other car went out of control, hit a tree, and the gas tank went up. It was a total loss."

Lucy was quiet for a moment, then she asked, "Are you sure you're all right? Do you want me to drive down there?"

Shayne laughed. "There's no need. I'm fine, and like I said, I only have to stay until tomorrow morning. There's nothing pressing there, is there?"

"Not a thing. I'm glad you called, Michael. I was going to be at your apartment tonight . . . to give you a proper welcome home. I would have worried when you didn't show up."

There was a wide, genuine smile on Shayne's face as he said, "I'll take a rain check on the welcome, until tomorrow. So don't worry, Angel. I'll see you then."

"All right, Michael. Goodbye . . . " Shayne was about to hang up when he heard her say suddenly, "Oh, wait, Michael. One thing did happen you might want to know about."

"What's that, Angel?"

"You know Alex Bellamy?"

"Yeah, the night watchman there. Doesn't like me much. What about him?"

"He was killed last night."

SHAYNE'S FINGERS TIGHTENED ON THE PHONE. "Killed? There in the building?"

"His body was found on the fifth floor this morning. He had been beaten to death, the police say. Some cash was gone from an insurance office up there, and Lee Darrell says Mr. Bellamy probably interrupted whoever was burglarizing the office. They don't have any clues yet. Lee came by and told me about it."

Shayne grunted. Lee Darrell was a good homicide cop, and if anybody could find out who killed the night watchman, it was him.

"Thanks for telling me, Angel. Bellamy and I may not have been buddies, but I hope they catch the guys who did it."

"So do I. I'll see you tomorrow, Michael."

Shayne said his goodbyes and hung up, tossing down the rest of his drink. He was reaching for the bottle to refill the glass when he heard a light knock on the door.

Marlene was standing there when he opened it, and she said, "May I come in?"

"Sure," Shayne said, stepping back and waving a hand. "Welcome to my castle. Is yours any better?"

"I'm afraid not," Marlene smiled. "I'm glad I don't have to stay here any longer than just tonight."

She seemed a little friendlier now then she had earlier, and Shayne asked, "Can I get you a drink? I think there's another glass in the bathroom."

"Thanks. I'd like that." As Shayne got the glass and poured cognac into it, she said, "I've been thinking, and I think you may have gotten the wrong idea. I must have struck you as a pretty unfriendly person."

Shayne shook his head. "You struck me as a woman with some kind of trouble in her life that was made even worse by the wreck. You didn't hurt my feelings, Marlene."

"Good, because I certainly didn't mean to." He handed the glass to her, and she went on, "Thank you, Mike. You don't mind if I call you Mike?"

"All my friends do."

"I think . . . I'd like to be your friend. I need a friend right now." She sipped from her glass, then put it down on the dresser. Shayne saw her face twisting, saw the tears start to come, and he muttered, "Oh, damn," under his breath as she came into his arms and began to sob.

The story came out of her slowly as she cried and drank and cried

some more. Shayne had heard it all before, the affair with a co-worker, a married man who had promised her he would get a divorce and marry her, the slow realization that the man had no intention of doing such a thing, the painful, angry break-up . . . All he could do was pat her on the back, refill her glass, and wish he hadn't encouraged her to tell him what was bothering her earlier. The last thing he wanted right now was a weepy woman and a story straight out of some goddamn soap opera . . . .

By the time a half-hour was over, though, she had talked most of it out of her system. She dried her eyes, downed one final drink, and said, "Thanks, Mike. I guess I really don't have that much to be upset about. The guy was a bastard, that's for sure. I'm better off without him."

"Yeah, right," Shayne said. "How about some dinner? Brewster said something about some steaks."

"Sounds good to me. Do you think they have room service?"

"I didn't see any restaurant," Shayne grinned. "I imagine all they have is room service." He picked up the phone and waited for someone in the office to answer again. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Marlene stand up and stretch, lifting her full breasts. She was a damn fine-looking woman, he thought.

And as one bushy eyebrow quirked and his mouth tightened, he wondered just what the hell this night was going to bring.

IV

THE STEAKS *WERE* GOOD. CASSIE BREWSTER BROUGHT THEM down to Shayne's cabin about an hour after he called, on thick, old plates, along with baked potatoes and an adequate salad. Cassie herself was about nineteen, an ample-figured, attractive girl, with the same sandy hair that her brother Jeff had. It was long and fell down her back in a thick torrent. She seemed slightly sullen as she delivered the meal, as if the request for it had put her out in some way. She said to Shayne, "When you're through, just call back up to the office, or bring the plates up yourself, if you've a mind to."

The sun had set by the time they finished the meal. Shayne had turned the lamp by the bed on earlier, and they had turned the dresser into a makeshift dinner table. Shayne poured more cognac in his glass, but Marlene put her palm over the top of hers when he offered the bottle. "I think I've had enough for now," she said. "I don't want my head to get completely muddled."

Shayne sipped at the smooth liquor and was searching for some in-

nocuous comment to make, when another knock sounded at the door. He got up and opened it, expecting to find Cassie back.

It wasn't Cassie Brewster, though. Lieutenant Reed stood there, holding his hat and smiling. He said, "Hello, Mr. Shayne. Is Ms. Kensington here?"

"Yeah," Shayne said, stepping back so Reed could come inside.

"Hello ma'am," Reed nodded to Marlene. "They told me at the office I might find you here. Sorry I interrupted your dinner."

"We were just finishing," Shayne said. "What can we do for you?"

Reed looked at Marlene again. "I just thought I'd stop and let you know that I had what was left of your car towed in, Ms. Kensington. I'm afraid we weren't able to salvage any of your belongings from inside, though."

"That's all right," Marlene said softly. "I didn't expect to be able to save anything. Well, at least there was nothing in there that can't be replaced. Most of my things are still back in Miami."

Shayne asked, "You still want us to stop at your office in the morning?"

"Yes, sir, if you would," Reed replied. "I'll have the paperwork all finished up by then, and you two can be on your way. I'm sorry to detain you like this . . . ."

Shayne waved a hand. "I know about routine, Lieutenant. It's not your fault."

"Glad you understand. Well, I'll see you in the morning." Reed put his hat on and left the cabin, walking back toward his patrol car, which was parked up next to the office. Shayne stood in the door for a moment, watching the officer. He thought he saw movement at the blinds of one of the windows in the main building. Reed turned slightly, waved a hand back at Shayne, and then the big detective stepped back inside the cabin and closed the door.

Marlene had left her seat on a straight-backed chair by the dresser and was sitting on the bed now. Shayne picked up the chair he had been sitting on, reversed it, and straddled it. Resting his arms on the back of it, he said, "What now? I don't think this place has much in the way of entertainment."

He had known when he asked the question where it might lead. Marlene leaned back on the bed, supporting her weight on an elbow, and said, "I suppose we'll have to keep each other company. It's liable to be a long night."

Shayne reached up and rubbed a thumb along his jawline. He didn't say anything, and after a moment, Marlene went on, "Why don't you

come over here beside me, Mike? That chair doesn't look too comfortable."

Shayne stood slowly and walked over to the side of the bed, looking down at Marlene. The dress had ridden up her thighs slightly, revealing a long expanse of finely designed leg. Shayne had his glass in his hand. He swallowed the rest of the liquor in it, then set it down on the nightstand beside the bed. He lowered his weight carefully beside her.

Her hand reached out and closed over his, her long slender fingers twining around his blunt, knobby ones. She said, "I'm glad you're here with me, Mike. I don't like being alone, especially in a strange place."

Shayne could feel the warmth of her body close beside him. Marlene looked up at him intently for a long moment, then she reached up and put her hand on the back of his head, pulling him down to her. His mouth came down on hers almost savagely. Her lips opened and her tongue darted out to fence with his. Shayne's arms went around her, pressing her against him and crushing her breasts against his chest.

A few minutes later, Marlene slid out of Shayne's arms and sat up. She said, "I'm going to go take a shower, if that tiny thing in my cabin works. Why don't you come over in about fifteen or twenty minutes, Mike?"

"All right," Shayne said, sitting up beside her. "I'd better take those plates back down to the office in the meantime, so that none of the Brewsters will show up looking for them."

WHEN MARLENE HAD GONE NEXT DOOR, leaving with an expectant smile on her face, Shayne gathered up the dishes and started down to the office. As soon as he stepped out of the door of his cabin, though, he noticed that Lieutenant Reed's patrol car was still sitting in the gravel parking lot. Someone in the office had turned on the main sign out by the road, and its neon tubes were reflecting off the roof of the lieutenant's car.

Shayne paused and frowned. He had thought that Reed had left earlier. Close to a half hour had gone by since he had left Shayne's cabin. Shayne walked on down toward the office slowly. It was possible, of course, even probable, that Reed was in the office, talking to Jesse Brewster, or one of the others.

Reed was nowhere to be seen when Shayne opened the screen door of the office, though. Jesse Brewster was sitting on a stool behind the counter, and his head jerked up when Shayne walked in.

"Thought I'd better bring these dishes back," Shayne said, setting

them on the counter. "Tell your daughter those were fine steaks."

Brewster grinned, but something about it looked forced to Shayne. "Told you about 'em, didn't I? My Cassie's a hell of a cook, I don't mind telling you. Her mother taught her good before she passed away. All my children are right fine kids."

"I'm sure they are," Shayne said. He took a cigarette out and lit it, tossing the match into an ashtray on the counter. "I was surprised to see that Lieutenant Reed was still around. I thought he had left a little while ago."

Brewster frowned. "Lieutenant Reed? The Highway Patrolman? Didn't know he was still here." The words came quickly, and Brewster's eyes were active as he spoke.

"His car's still out there," Shayne said, glancing back over his shoulder. Even though the blinds were down, the patrol car was still visible through their slats.

Brewster looked past Shayne and said, "So it is. Well, he must be talking to Jeff or Lonnie." He grinned quickly. "Maybe he's even doing a little courting. He's a young fella, after all, and my Cassie is a looker."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you hit it right on the head," Shayne said easily. "What do I owe you for the dinners?"

"Oh, another five'll cover it. Will you and Miss Kensington be wanting to get an early start in the morning?"

"Not too early," Shayne said. "We've got to go by the highway patrol office and sign some paperwork about that accident we were in earlier."

"Accident?" Brewster asked.

"That's how the lady and I met," Shayne grinned. "I told you we had just run into each other."

Brewster looked blank for a moment, then suddenly laughed. "I get you. Well, I'll see you in the morning, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne went outside and stopped beside the lieutenant's car for a moment. His hand rested for a second on the hood. Cold . . . Reed hadn't left after all, that much was certain. Still, Shayne thought as he took a final puff on the cigarette and then ground it out on the gravel beneath his heel, it was none of his business. Besides, what Brewster had said was probably right and Reed was elsewhere in the motel, talking to one of the others.

But as he turned to walk back to his cabin, he saw the flicker of movement inside the office as Jesse Brewster stepped back hurriedly from the window.

SHAYNE WOULDN'T HAVE SURVIVED AS LONG AS HE HAD in the rough and tumble detective profession without a highly developed sixth sense, something that came from deep inside and warned him of trouble. That feeling was starting to grow inside him now, and he knew better than to ignore it entirely. If anything was going to develop between Marlene and himself, it would have to wait until he had put that nagging feeling at ease.

Shayne stopped at the door to her cabin. He tried the knob, found it unlocked as he had expected, and stepped inside. The sound of the shower running in the bathroom came to his ears. He closed the door behind him and stood there waiting, his lean face serious.

The water cut off a moment later. Evidently, Marlene had heard him come in, because she called out, "Mike, is that you?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"Just stay right where you are."

She came out a moment later, beads of water sparkling in her short hair. There was a thick towel wrapped around her torso, leaving her shoulders bare and stopping just below the tops of her lush thighs. She smiled at Shayne and said, "Do you like what you see?"

The corners of Shayne's mouth turned up slightly. "Very much. You're lovely, Marlene."

She crossed the room, holding the towel to her body loosely. Shayne took her in his arms as she came to him, her head tilted back, her lips parted in silent beckoning.

He kissed her, feeling desire building within him as her lips worked against his. The towel didn't quite reach around her, and his hands ran up and down the smooth, cool flesh of her back.

Shayne broke the kiss and said softly. "Why don't you just get on into bed and wait for me, all right?"

"Wait for you?" Marlene purred. "Why should I wait, Mike, when you're right here?"

"Because there's something I have to do first," Shayne said, trying to disengage himself from her arms.

"Something more important?" Marlene said, as if she couldn't believe it.

"Maybe." Shayne managed to get loose and stroke quickly over to the door. "I'll be back in a few minutes, I hope."

"*You* hope?" Marlene wailed. Her face was a mixture of desire, confusion, and budding anger. Shayne stepped outside, swinging the door shut behind him, before that anger had a chance to flower.

He turned toward the office . . . and stopped suddenly. His forehead creased in a frown, and his fingers went up to tug on his left earlobe.

Lieutenant Reed's car was gone.

V

SHAYNE STOOD STOCK STILL FOR A MOMENT, staring at the empty patch of gravel where the patrol car had been only minutes before. He had planned to poke around the motel some, looking for Reed, but now it looked like he wouldn't need to. Wherever the lieutenant had been, he had obviously returned and taken his car.

The sound of an engine came to Shayne's ears as he stood there, though. It sounded as if the vehicle was moving slowly, and it was coming from the other side of the motel.

Shayne broke into a trot. He cut behind the office, going past the other row of vacant cabins, and then he was on the back side of the complex. He jerked back behind the corner of a cabin as he heard car doors slam. Moving cautiously, he edged an eye past the corner, so that he could see what was going on.

The patrol car was parked directly behind one of the cabins, where it couldn't be seen from the road. Cassie Brewster had just gotten out of it, along with her father, and they were walking, heads down, toward the office.

Shayne ducked back. It was dark in the courtyard between the rows of cabins, and he hurried across it, not wanting Brewster or Cassie to see him. That worried instinct of his had become a jangling alarm bell now. There was something very wrong at the Rip Tide Motel, and he had a feeling he knew what it was. His best bet now would be to grab Marlene, stick her in the Buick, and get the hell out of here before the Brewsters got even more suspicious than they had to be already.

Shayne had just come out through the gap between the two cabins and turned toward the door behind which Marlene waited, when a hand came down on his shoulder and spun him around roughly. His fists came up, cocked and ready, as he saw that the giant Lonnie Brewster stood there.

Jeff came sauntering up beside his younger brother, an unlit cigarette drooping from his lips. He said around it, "Howdy, Mr. Shayne. What are you doing out wandering around after dark?"

The flashing red glow from the motel's neon sign fell over them as they stood there tensely. Shayne said, "I was just out for a walk. That's all right, isn't it?"

Jeff shrugged. "I suppose so. You got to watch out, though, we got snakes around here. Never can tell what you might step on in the dark."

"I'll watch my step, then. Be seeing you, boys." Shayne started to turn away nonchalantly, but Lonnie reached out and put a big paw of a hand on his shoulder again.

"Why don't you come down to the office with us, Mr. Shayne?" Jeff asked softly. "I'm sure we'd all enjoy talking to a famous detective fella like you."

Jeff knew who he was, then, had probably recognized his name from newspaper stories. And they had seen him emerging from the courtyard, just after their father and sister had concealed the patrol car behind the motel. Shayne felt a prickling on the back of his neck. They weren't going to let him talk his way out of this one.

He was going to try, though. There was no point in confirming their suspicions unless he had to. He said, "Maybe some other time. I'm pretty tired right now."

Lonnie had taken his hand off Shayne's shoulder, but now the huge, silent boy started to reach out again. Jeff said, "Come on, Mr. Shayne. You just come with us."

Shayne felt anger building inside him. He slapped Lonnie's reaching hand aside and snapped, "I don't like being grabbed."

"Now ain't that too bad," Jeff breathed. "Get him, Lonnie!"

EVEN WITH THE WARNING, SHAYNE COULDN'T GET OUT of the way in time. Lonnie dived toward him with surprising speed, wrapping his long arms around Shayne's torso. Shayne managed to keep his arms free, though, and he drove a quick combination of short, hard blows into Lonnie's face.

Lonnie grunted and squeezed harder, leaning backwards and lifting. Shayne felt his feet start to come off the ground. He lashed out with one foot, felt it crack against the boy's shin. At the same time, he brought the sides of his hands down as hard as he could on either side of Lonnie's neck, then followed that with explosive, open-handed slaps against the boy's ears. Lonnie howled in pain, dropping Shayne from the bear hug.

Jeff whipped toward him, yelling, "You hurt my brother, you bastard!" A fist flew toward Shayne's face. The detective jerked to the side, letting the blow sail harmlessly past him.

Shayne drove a punch of his own into Jeff's midsection, the bony fist sinking into belly. Jeff gasped as the air was forced out of his lungs. Shayne crossed a right that clipped Jeff on the chin, spinning him around and dropping him on all fours.

Lonnie had recovered enough to charge at Shayne again, and Shayne had to dodge nimbly to avoid his charge. As Lonnie went past him,

Shayne put his hands together, and clubbed them into the boy's back, sending him sprawling full-length on the gravel.

Shayne was about to follow up on that move when a sudden blast ripped through the air, almost deafening him. He spun around, just in time to see Jesse Brewster lowering the shotgun he had been pointing in the air. Cassie was right behind him, carrying an identical weapon.

Brewster lined up the barrels of the shotgun with Shayne's belly and said in a high-pitched voice, "What the hell's going on here? I don't like it when guests start picking on my boys, Mr. Shayne!"

Shayne took a deep breath, but other than that, he stood still, not wanting to spook Brewster while the motel owner held the shotgun. He said, "It was the other way around, Brewster. Your boys were the ones getting tough with me."

Jeff scrambled to his feet and hurried over to his father, speaking in a rapid whisper that Shayne couldn't make out. Brewster looked back at Shayne, and his expression had gone from belligerence to one of cold cunning. He said, "Sorry the boys bothered you, Mr. Shayne. I'm sure it was all just a misunderstanding. You can go back to your cabin now, and anything else you want, it's on the house. I'd like to make up somehow for this little scuffle."

"It's all right," Shayne said brusquely. He watched Jeff helping Lonnie to his feet, then turned and walked quickly toward his cabin. His back crawled as he turned it towards the Brewsters and their guns, but he kept his pace sure and confident.

The door of Marlene's cabin opened just before he passed it, and she stepped outside, her face tight with worry. He could tell she had dressed hurriedly, probably when she had heard the startling boom of the shotgun.

"What is it, Mike?" she asked anxiously, putting a hand on his arm. "What's wrong? Was that a shot I heard?"

"It sure was," Shayne said quietly. He looked back at the four people watching them, and there was a smile on his face as he lifted a hand and called, "Sorry about the misunderstanding. Goodnight." He slipped an arm around Marlene and started to steer her into the cabin, still able to feel the eyes on them.

When he had shut the door behind them, Marlene said, "Do you think it was a good idea to let them see you coming in here with me? They might get the wrong idea."

"Or the right one," Shayne said.

"You still haven't told me what happened out there."

"Nothing for you to worry about," Shayne told her. "Jeff and Lonnie jumped me. They must have thought I was a prowler or something.

We mixed it up a little before the old man came along and untangled us."

"Are you all right?"

"Sure, I'm fine." Shayne glanced around at the room, then said, "I think I'm going next door to get that bottle of Martell. Be back in a minute."

"Do we really need it, Mike?" Marlene asked, her voice throaty; she was obviously ready to pick up where they had left off.

"I do," he said. He opened the door and stepped outside, trying to look casual.

SHAYNE SAW THE BLINDS IN THE OFFICE MOVE. They were watching him, and he knew they would come charging out if they saw him trying anything. They couldn't know for sure that he had seen them hiding the patrol car, and he knew how important it was to keep that doubt in their minds.

He stepped into his own cabin, grabbed the bottle of cognac, and went right back out. As he shut the door behind him, he thought wishfully about the gun in his suitcase, but he didn't want to stay in the room long enough to dig it out.

Marlene was unzipping her dress as he came back into her cabin, and Shayne growled, "Hold it, let's have a drink."

She frowned at him, but she ran the zipper back up and took the glass he held out to her. He splashed cognac into her glass and then into his, then sank down on a chair to sip it.

Marlene sat on the bed, looking quizzically at him. She knew something was wrong, but what it was eluded her, Shayne knew. He swallowed the brandy and thought about what he had discovered so far.

The Brewsters had done something to Lieutenant Reed, he was sure of that. The feeling deep in his bones told him that. He didn't know the how or why of it, but he knew the situation was deadly. Going by the tense nervousness of the Brewsters and the way they had tried to hide the car after Shayne had noticed it, they were plenty scared. If Reed was dead, the body had to be concealed somewhere close by.

Shayne tugged gently on his earlobe and tried to think of the best course of action he could take. Now that the Brewsters were aware that he might have tumbled on what was going on, they wouldn't let him and Marlene leave, he was sure of that. If they got into the Buick and tried to make a run for it, Brewster and Cassie would be out of the office in a flash with their shotguns. And there was no way he could call for help, since all the telephones went through the office. Shayne wished Marlene wasn't here. By himself, he might have been able to

outmaneuver them, but taking care of her too would slow him down, probably to a fatal degree.

He could imagine what the Brewsters had in mind. They would wait until later in the night, when there was no chance of anyone else coming along the highway, then kill their two guests and dispose of the bodies. It would be simple enough to take them out onto the causeway and dump them into the ocean. And for the moment, Shayne knew he was defenseless.

Marlene stood up suddenly and went over to the door. She said, "I'm going to get some ice. I'm tired of drinking this straight."

The move took Shayne by surprise, and by the time he stood up and started to protest, she was out the door. To run after her and stop her now would only fan the flames of suspicion in the watching Brewsters. He waited tensely for her to return.

When she did, she was empty-handed. She slammed the door behind her and said, "Dammit! Everything's going wrong today. The stupid machine's got an Out of Order sign on it."

Shayne put his drink down on the dresser. He went into the bathroom and studied the little window set high in one wall. He slid the glass up as Marlene stood in the doorway and frowned at him in puzzlement. The screen wouldn't budge, and Shayne saw that the frame had been painted over. He took his pocketknife out and began sawing through the mesh as Marlene's mouth dropped open. "What the hell are you doing?" she demanded.

"Go to the phone," Shayne ordered, ignoring her question. "Get the Brewsters down here someway. Scream . . . or tell them a snake got in, that would be better. Tell them a snake got in the cabin and bit me, and I've passed out and the snake's still in here. Can you do that?"

"But . . . but I don't understand — "

"You don't have to understand!" Shayne pushed the cut screen out, then stood up on the toilet and got ready to go through the opening he had made. "Just do it!"

Marlene must have caught the urgency in his voice, because she swallowed and went to the phone. He heard her pick it up, and then a moment later he heard her begin to repeat what he had told her to say in a shaky, breathless voice. She was honestly scared now, and that made it more convincing.

Shayne wiggled awkwardly through the window, dropping into the shadows outside as he heard running footsteps pounding down toward the cabin on the other side of the building. He waited until he heard the voices of Jesse and Jeff inside the cabin before he sprinted toward the office.

The ice machine was in a little alcove at the rear of the office building, and Shayne ran right to it. He ripped the Out of Order sign that had been taped to it off, then threw the big sliding door open. There was a small yellow light in the ceiling of the alcove, and it showed him that the bin inside was full of ice cubes, just as he had expected it to be. He plunged his arm deep into the frigid pile.

His fingers clasped down on something that wasn't ice, and he grasped it tightly, pulled it up through the ice. A shiver ran through him, and it wasn't from the cold.

It was an arm he had hold of, an arm clad in the sleeve of a gray uniform shirt. As soon as he saw it, he recognized the uniform.

Shayne knew he had found Lieutenant Reed.

VI

THERE WAS A WIND ACROSS THE KEYS THIS NIGHT, a wind that sometimes buffeted the little sports car as it rocketed northwards, over the little islands and the mile-long causeways.

The wind did not bother the man at the wheel. His supple hands held the wheel confidently, his foot pressed down hard on the accelerator. The red needle of the speedometer hovered at the ninety miles per hour mark.

The trail had led him south, to an island called Dragon Key, and now it was taking him northwards again. The quarry had left his temporary haven and was now heading home, according to what had been discovered at the last stop on the trail. Soon now, soon, the journey would be at an end. There was weariness in the driver's body, but none in his mind. The followers of the One he served were trained not to feel their fatigue or their pain. He had been busy ever since the night before, when he had disposed of the night watchman, altering the circumstances of the death so that no one could guess the truth. Now he felt that peculiar exhilaration that came when an ending was near, the almost supernatural instinct that told him death would come home to its rightful place this night. He would *know* somehow, when he had found the one he sought; perhaps it *was* supernatural. There was no way of knowing what powers were vested in the One he served.

The killer had known of the One, even as a child in China. He followed the One out of love, as much as fear. And when it had come to the attention of those in power that there was a blood debt to be avenged, he would have almost begged to be the one chosen as the weapon of vengeance. The honor of being so chosen was immense.

It had never occured to him to wonder why the man known as Shayne

had to die. He had his mission, that was enough. He had heard rumors, though, heard how a wayward child of the One he served had come to harm at the hands of this Shayne. The child had gone into seclusion somewhere in the far mountains, leaving the debt of vengeance to be paid by those who were particularly well-equipped to carry out such a quest.

A tiny smile curved the lips of the killer. It was good when a child returned to her ancestors for help, even a child with tainted blood. It was not the child's fault if she carried the blood of enemies. She also carried the blood of the One, and that made her part of the vast family that had sprung from the old monastery on the mountain . . . .

THE WIND WHIPPING THROUGH THE OPEN WINDOWS of the car drowned out the sound of the siren, but the killer saw the flashing lights of the vehicle that had come up behind him. He eased up on the gas, letting the sports car coast to a stop on the shoulder. He hoped his minor delay would not take long. There was something, a disturbance in his inner being, that told him he was very near to his ultimate destination.

"Just what the hell were you doin', boy?" a harsh voice demanded at the window. "Do you know how fast you were goin'? Get your butt out of that car!"

The killer opened the door and stepped out onto the shoulder of the highway. The policeman snapped his flashlight on, shining its bright beam over the man he had stopped.

"Let's see your license, boy," the patrolman barked, his other hand on the butt of his heavy revolver.

The killer said, "I have no license. I have but recently learned how to operate one of these machines."

"Is that so?" the cop growled, starting to take his gun out. "Well, then, boy, you'd best come along with me, real peaceful like, hear?"

"I regret this," the killer said in his native tongue. "I regret bringing death to anyone but the one I seek. But I must not be stopped."

"Now, goddamn it, I don't understand that Chink talk — " the highway patrolman began. He broke off when he saw the hand flashing toward his face. He tried to bring his gun up, but before the motion even got started good, something that felt like a sledgehammer smashed into his nose.

Bone and cartilage shattered. Slivers of the destruction sliced into the man's brain, setting off a brilliant display of fireworks in his head. It lasted only a split-second, though, and then there was only darkness for him as he fell backwards, dead before he hit the ground.

The killer slipped back into the car and put it in gear. There was no need to disguise the circumstances of this death. No one would ever connect it with the man he sought. His foot came down hard on the accelerator again, making the wheels throw up gravel as he left the dead officer on the shoulder. Already, thoughts of the death he had just caused were fading from the mind of the killer. He was concentrating again on the man he really wanted to kill, the big redheaded detective from Miami . . . .

FIVE MINUTES LATER, AS THE SPORTS CAR NEARED the northern tip of another key, the cool death-bringer at the wheel saw a flashing red sign that seemed to draw him on. The disturbance of his karma was stronger now. There was no logical reason for it, but logic seldom entered into his head. This was where he had to go, he knew, and the reason for the knowledge was no concern of his.

The killer turned his car off the road, onto a gravel parking lot, past the sign that flashed its message — WELCOME — RIP TIDE MOTEL — FRIENDLIEST PLACE IN THE FLORIDA KEYS . . .

VII

"FREEZE, DAMN YOU!"

Shayne let go of Reed's limp arm and let it drop back into the ice machine as Cassie Brewster's voice ripped out behind him. Keeping his body still, he turned his head and looked over his shoulder. The girl was standing just outside the alcove, the shotgun clutched tightly in her hands. Her grip wasn't wavering, and Shayne knew the weapon could rip him in half at this range.

Maybe it had been stupid to risk one of them getting the drop on him, as Cassie had done, but when Marlene had told him about the ice machine being out of order, the hunch that had sprung up in his brain had been too strong to ignore. He had proved it was right . . . but he had tipped his hand, too. Now the Brewsters knew for sure that he was aware of what was going on at the motel.

The elder Brewster's voice came from down the row of cabins, calling out, "Cassie, what the hell — "

Shayne saw Cassie's eyes flick away from him, and in that moment, he made his move. He leaped forward, closing the few feet between them in a split-second and knocking the double barrels of the shotgun aside. Cassie cried out in surprise. Her finger contracted involuntarily on the trigger, and both barrels went off.

The double load slammed into the ground behind Shayne. His

fingers closed over the barrels of the gun, wrenching it free from Cassie's grip even as his other hand came down on her shoulder and shoved her roughly away. Shayne heard running footsteps behind him, and as he whirled, he reversed the shotgun, gripping it like a club.

Jeff Brewster was only a few feet away. Shayne lashed out at him. Jeff dodged to the side, taking the heavy stock of the gun on his shoulder. He cried out in pain, but his momentum carried him on into Shayne.

Shayne tried to keep his feet as Jeff ran into him, but he felt his balance deserting him. He managed to hang onto the gun as he fell over backwards, and he jabbed out with it, toward Jesse Brewster. Brewster had been right behind his son. He avoided Shayne's thrust with the gun and kicked out a booted foot. It thudded into Shayne's arm, making it go numb to the elbow. The shotgun slipped from Shayne's fingers.

Brewster caught the gun up and hovered over Shayne, the weapon raised to deliver a killing blow. Then he hesitated and finally stepped back after a long moment.

"I ought to bash your brains out, you damned troublemaker," he gritted, "but it'll wait." He turned his head and called, "Bring the woman, Lonnie."

SHAYNE RAISED HIMSELF INTO A SITTING POSITION as Lonnie brought a struggling and confused Marlene down toward the office. His huge hand dwarfed her upper arm where he held it. Jeff and Cassie had gotten to their feet, and along with their father, they encircled Shayne.

"You just had to keep poking, didn't you?" Brewster said bitterly. "You just couldn't stay in one cabin or the other with that slut and leave us alone!"

Shayne climbed to his feet slowly. Brewster still held the gun ready to use as a bludgeon, and with his sons and daughter right there, Shayne knew that the odds were just a little too high to be trying another break just yet.

"Mike, what's happening? Why are these people doing this?" Marlene asked. Shayne detected a strong note of hysteria in her voice. She wasn't used to being in desperate straits like this.

"We've stumbled onto something pretty ugly, Marlene," he said tightly. "But then murder's always ugly."

"M-murder?" Marlene whispered.

Brewster's face twisted in a snarl. "Go ahead and tell her about it,

Mr. Detective. My boy told me how famous you are and how good you are at solving things."

"They killed Lieutenant Reed," Shayne said to Marlene. "I don't know why, but I know they killed him. Then they hid the body in this ice machine. They hadn't gotten around to hiding his car before I noticed it was still here, though."

"We were just a little too slow for a big time detective like you," Cassie spat at him. "Damn little good it's going to do you, though."

"Let's get inside," Brewster said. "Then we can decide what to do with them."

Shayne was marched ahead of Brewster and Jeff, while Lonnie and Cassie brought up the rear with the terrified Marlene between them. As they walked, Brewster broke open the shotgun and put two more shells into its chambers.

When they were all inside the lobby, Cassie picked up another shotgun that was lying on the counter and trained it on Shayne. Her father put his weapon down and sank wearily into one of the broken-down chairs.

"Things would'a been a whole lot simpler if you had minded your own business, Shayne," he said. "Then you and the lady could have gone on your way in the morning with no hard feelings. As it is, though, looks like you two are just too dangerous to us."

Shayne saw that Marlene was only inches away from screaming and going into a full-scale breakdown. Hoping to forestall it, he said quickly, "The least you can do is tell me about it. I've got some professional curiosity, you know."

Brewster sighed. "Might as well, I guess. You've had a good look at this place, Shayne. How much money you think we make off it?"

"Not much."

"Not much is right. Not nearly enough to live on. So the boys have taken up a little sideline — armed robbery."

Shayne remembered vaguely hearing something about a series of robberies at liquor stores and roadside businesses throughout the Keys. It looked like the Brewsters were probably behind most of them.

"You've seen my boy Lonnie," Brewster went on. "He's not much in the brains department, but people sure fall all over themselves to cooperate with a big boy like him. Him and Jeff do a real good job."

"Damn right," Jeff added. "The cops ain't come close to catching us."

"So what happened?" Shayne asked. "Why kill Reed?"

Brewster shook his head. "That was Lonnie's doing." The boy was standing beside his father's chair, and his head dropped, shame-

facedly, at the words. Brewster reached out and caught his arm. "Here, now, boy, nobody blames you. You see, Mr. Shayne, we've taught Lonnie to be scared of the cops, and when he saw that Lieutenant Reed coming into the office, he thought he was after him. You just got scared, didn't you, Lonnie? It's not your fault you hit him harder than you intended to."

Marlene was shuddering beside Shayne now. He slipped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. He said, "Once it happened, you were determined to cover up for Lonnie, weren't you, Brewster? Even if it meant you had to kill us?"

"I don't want to," Brewster said emphatically. "But nobody's taking Lonnie away from us again. The state took him away when he was just a little kid and put him in some home for idiots for a couple of years, and he's just now getting over that. He's staying here with us, no matter what it takes."

Marlene buried her face against Shayne's broad chest and began to sob in sheer horror. Shayne's face was a tight, grim mask as he looked over at Jeff and Cassie. "Are the two of you going to be part of another murder?"

"I love my brother," Cassie snapped. "Families got to stick together. Even a dumb bastard like you should know that."

"Now, Cassie," Brewster admonished. "No call for you to talk like that. We don't want this to be more unpleasant than it has to be." He looked over at the old clock on the wall. "It's nearly midnight. There won't be no traffic through here from now on. Cassie, you go back in the storeroom and get three of them tarps. Jeff, you and me'll go get the back of the station wagon ready."

"How're we going to do it, Pa?" Jeff asked.

"Shotgun's too messy," Brewster mused. "I'd say a knife would be the best way. We can catch the blood on the tarps, then roll 'em up in 'em and dump the whole lot off the causeway. We'd best get some weights, too, to hold them down."

Marlene screamed.

SHAYNE HELD HER AGAINST HIM TIGHTLY, smothering the shriek with his chest. She was trembling so hard that he thought she was going to go into a fit. Brewster looked at them for a second, then made a clucking noise with his teeth and tongue.

"Lonnie, you stay here and watch these two," he ordered. "Don't let them try anything. We'll be ready to take care of them in a few minutes."

Shayne held onto Marlene as Brewster, Jeff, and Cassie left the

lobby to go about their grisly tasks. As soon as the three of them were gone, Lonnie shuffled over to them and stood awkwardly staring at them.

"What do you want?" Shayne growled.

For the first time, the boy spoke. He said in a slow, halting voice, "I'm sorry, mister. I really caused ever'body a lot of trouble."

"Yeah," Shayne nodded. He thought he saw a possible glimmer of hope in this simple-minded youngster. "But you don't want to make things worse, do you?"

"No, sir . . . I sure don't."

"Well, killing us is only going to make things worse."

Lonnie shook his head. "Papa says we got to. I don't want to, but I got to do what Papa says. I . . . I like you, mister. I like you, too, lady."

Into Marlene's ear, Shayne hissed savagely, "Stop crying, dammit!" As she tried to swallow her sniffles and sobs, Shayne took hold of her head and turned her tear-streaked face toward Lonnie.

"She's a real pretty lady, isn't she?" Shayne said insistently. "She's a real pretty lady, and she doesn't want you to hurt her, Lonnie."

"Th-that's right, Lonnie," Marlene gulped, getting an inkling of what Shayne was trying to do. "You . . . you wouldn't hurt me, would you? I . . . I like you, Lonnie, I really do."

Lonnie was frowning mightily now. "I won't hurt you. Papa and Jeff, they'll do all that stuff. They . . . they'll just let me carry you. I'm good at carrying things. You should'a seen me the time I picked up an engine block."

"I'll bet it was really something." Marlene was as pale as Shayne had ever seen a human being, but she was moving out of his arms now, finding the courage somewhere to do what had to be done if they were going to have any chance at all. "Lonnie . . . before we leave, don't we have time to go down to one of the cabins, just you and me?" She went a step closer to him.

Now there was excitement shining in Lonnie's eyes. Shayne swallowed the sick feeling that was roiling around in his stomach. Despite all that had happened, he could feel no real rancor toward Lonnie. The boy couldn't help his condition.

But Shayne knew that pity wasn't going to slow his hand any when and if their chance came . . .

"C-come closer, Lonnie," Marlene said in a throaty voice that was a mockery of the sensual tones she had been using in Shayne's cabin earlier. But it must have sounded real to Lonnie, because he stepped closer to them, desire overriding any caution he might have felt. As

he swallowed nervously and reached out for Marlene, he came within arm's length of Shayne.

SHAYNE'S FINGERS CLOSED OVER THE HEAVY BRASS ashtray on the counter and whipped it up and around. Marlene saw the move and ducked toward the floor. Shayne put all his weight behind the blow as he lunged toward Lonnie.

The boy didn't even have time to yell as the ashtray slammed into his head with a soggy thud. His eyes rolled up, he grunted, and then he was falling to the floor like a felled tree.

Shayne dropped the ashtray and grabbed the stunned Marlene's hand. "Come on!" he barked. "This is our only chance!"

Pulling her along with him, he burst through the door and out onto the parking lot. Behind them, he heard Cassie yell, "Hey! Pa! Jeff! They're getting away!"

Shayne ran as hard as he could toward the Buick, parked less than thirty feet away. He could hear running footsteps on the other side of the office building and knew that the Brewsters would be after them in seconds. If the Buick failed to start on the first try . . . .

He veered off suddenly, jerking Marlene roughly. She was already gasping for breath, and he knew she couldn't keep up this pace for long. The Buick wasn't going to help them, though. As they approached, he saw that the hood wasn't quite caught. There was only one reason someone would have been under that hood . . . to disable the car.

There were woods at the edge of the parking lot, a stand of scrubby palmetto and tall sawgrass. It would be scant cover, but it was better than nothing. If they could get in there, among the deep shadows, there might be a chance that he could take on their pursuers one at a time. Shayne knew that was about the only hope they had.

A shotgun boomed behind them, and Marlene cried out. Shayne didn't turn to look, because she kept running, something she couldn't have done if she had been seriously wounded. They plunged into the woods and disappeared into the darkness, with Brewster, Jeff, and Cassie racing across the parking lot after them. Brewster and Cassie carried the shotguns, and Jeff had a long, wicked-looking knife clutched tightly in his fist. All three of them ran into the woods after Shayne and Marlene.

And no one saw the little sports car that pulled off the highway onto the parking lot a few minutes later . . . .

VIII

A HUNDRED YARDS DEEP INTO THE WOODS, Shayne and Marlene crouched at the base of a tree, trying to catch their breath as quietly as possible. Shayne's lungs were crying out for him to take great, noisy gulps of oxygen, but he fought the urges down. He imagined the problem was even worse for Marlene. Somewhere off to his right, he could hear the waves washing at the beaches of the key.

Shayne put his mouth against her ear and whispered, "I want you to stay here, Marlene. I won't be gone long."

She clutched at him desperately. "Don't leave me here, Mike, please! Don't leave me alone!"

"Keep your voice down," he hissed. "If you keep quiet and don't move around, they won't find you. Besides, I hope I'll be causing enough commotion to keep all of them occupied. Our only chance is if I can take them out one at a time."

Marlene nodded shakily, seeing the logic in his words, but before she turned him loose, she held onto him even tighter for a moment. In a voice so low that he could barely make out the words, she said, "I . . . I thought earlier that I didn't care anymore, that there was nothing left in life for me. Love sure as hell didn't seem to be working out. But now I want to live, Mike, I don't want to die, I don't want to — "

"Nobody does," Shayne said, his hand going up to stroke her hair gently.

"You — you didn't think I was a slut, did you, like that awful old man said?"

"No . . . I thought you were a very lovely, very sad lady. Hell," Shayne suddenly growled, "I was just thinking what a lucky guy I was. Now, are you going to be all right?"

She nodded, her face tight against his chest. He put a hand under her chin, lifted her head, and brushed his lips over her mouth quickly. Then he was standing up, squeezing her shoulder, and disappearing into the shadows.

SHAYNE MOVED AS QUIETLY AS HE KNEW HOW, stopping often to listen intently. He heard movement through the brush, off to the left, and then the sound of the Brewsters calling softly to each other came to his ears.

He put his back against a tree and stood stock-still. One of them was close and coming closer. Shayne held his breath and listened to the approaching footsteps.

An almost shapeless form moved past him in the shadows. Judging from the general shape and size, Shayne thought it was probably Jeff. A stray beam of moonlight came through the trees overhead and glinted on the blade of the knife in the man's hand.

Shayne waited until Jeff, if that's who it was, was completely past him, then lunged away from the tree. He had laced his fingers together, and he hit the dim figure as hard as he could with both hands. He knew that a blow to the back of the neck like that could kill, but right then, he didn't care.

The clubbed fists slammed home, snapping Jeff's head back. He didn't have time to make even the slightest sound before he blacked out, falling forward and dropping the knife. Shayne went to his knees beside the fallen figure, his fingers searching for the dropped weapon.

They closed over the blade, found the hilt, and drew the knife to him. Working by feel, he found a pulse in the unconscious man's neck. It was fast, but strong.

The other two had heard the muffled sounds of the attack, to judge by their frantic calls. Shayne heard Brewster and Cassie, and knew for sure that it was Jeff he had knocked out. He stood up as more footsteps came hurrying toward him.

There was no point in silence now. The best thing for him to do was to try to lead them away from Marlene. He started through the woods at a cautious run, being careful not to plow into any of the trees.

He had only gone a few feet, though, when a sudden scream chilled his blood. There was a wild thrashing in the brush, then Cassie shouted, "It's the girl, Pa! She's headed for the beach!"

Shayne bit back a curse. It must have been blind luck that had sent Cassie stumbling over Marlene, but then it was only luck that had enabled Marlene to break away. Shayne paused only long enough to orient himself to the sound of the waves again, then plunged toward the beach.

The four of them emerged from the trees onto the broad strip of glittering sand almost at the same time. Shayne felt the wind from the sea hit him in the face as he ran onto the beach.

Twenty yards away from him, Marlene had just run out of the trees, too. Her feet tangled in the soft sand, and she went down with a cry as Shayne watched. Cassie burst out of the woods right behind her, coming to a stop and leveling the shotgun she carried at Marlene.

Shayne heard the sound of someone else behind him, and he had just started to whirl when Jesse Brewster yelled, "Hold still, damn you! It's over, Shayne! You've caused us enough trouble!"

Shayne turned slowly until he could see the whole scene. Brewster

was behind him, holding the other shotgun, ready to blast him if he tried anything. Close by, Marlene lay gasping in the sand, Cassie standing over her.

"Jeff's knocked out back there in the woods," Brewster said to Cassie. "Looks like he's all right, though. You better be glad you didn't kill him, Shayne. This way, I'll be merciful, even after you hit Lonnie like you did. I'll just blow you away right quick. You ready, Cassie?"

"Ready, Pa."

THE KNIFE WAS STILL IN SHAYNE'S HAND. All he could see to do was throw it at Cassie to try to keep her from killing Marlene, while he tried to dodge the blast from Brewster's shotgun. But even as the plan ran through his mind in less than a split-second, he knew it was hopeless.

He saw the movement out of the corner of his eye and turned his head toward Brewster. He saw the shape come hurtling out of the woods in a flying kick, heard the sharp crack as the attacker's foot hit Brewster in the back. The barrels of the gun jerked upwards as Brewster screamed, discharging with a roar, sending the deadly pellets harmlessly into the sky. Brewster fell to the sand, his body twisted unnaturally, shrieking, "My back! My back's broken!"

The man had landed lithely on his feet, and as Shayne stood tensely in the moonlight, the man turned toward him, ignoring the howling Brewster now that he was no longer a threat, and asked, "You are the one called Michael Shayne?"

Shayne cast a glance at Cassie, saw that she looked stunned by this unexpected development. At least she hadn't shot Marlene. Shayne said, "Yeah, I'm Mike Shayne. But who the hell — "

"I have come to kill you, Michael Shayne," the man said. In the moonlight, Shayne saw that he was slender, not too tall, dressed in a plain suit. The wind ruffled his short dark hair slightly. His face was calm, composed. Shayne saw that he was an Oriental.

"You bastard!" Cassie screamed, breaking out of her stunned trance and swinging the shotgun toward the newcomer. "You hurt my pa!"

The man's hand flicked to the side, and something whickered metallically through the night air. Cassie cried out in pain, a cry that turned into an agonized gurgle, as the gun dropped from her hands and she fell to the sand next to the terrified Marlene.

The man was standing still again, regarding Shayne with his narrow, slanting eyes. He had never taken his gaze off the big redhead, yet his

throw with whatever kind of weapon it was had been accurate.

"Mike!" Marlene called, her voice breaking in panic. "She's dead! There's a thing in her neck — "

"A *shuriken*, I'd bet," Shayne said quietly, studying the man who stood on the sand staring at him. "Leiko sent you, didn't she?"

"It was a *shuriken*," the man said. "I can allow no one to interfere with my sacred quest. But I was sent by the One Who Is Served."

"Call her what you will," Shayne growled, getting a better grip on the knife. "I knew she was alive, despite all the odds. But I never thought she'd send an assassin after me."

Brewster had passed out from the pain of his broken back, and he was lying quietly between them now. Marlene was on hands and knees, trying to get away from Cassie's body and the dark pool that was spreading on the sand.

The assassin said, still in his quiet, controlled voice, "I am here to avenge a blood debt, an affair of honor. You may prepare to die now, Michael Shayne."

"And you can go to hell!" Shayne cried, throwing himself at the man.

BUT THE ASSASSIN WAS NO LONGER THERE, twisting aside with what appeared to be a minimum effort, slashing downward with one hand and sending the knife spinning out of Shayne's grip. Shayne clutched at his suddenly-numb hand and tried to stop his stumbling run.

The assassin gave a high-pitched cry and left his feet again. Shayne felt a piledriver blow in his side, and he pitched to the sand, agony coursing through him. He rolled desperately to the side as the killer launched another kick.

Twice before he had faced an opponent like this and both times they had been in the employ of the mysterious woman called the Black Lotus, a woman whom Shayne also knew as Leiko. She professed to love him . . . but twice she had been willing to leave him to die when he was wounded.

Those other men had been called Ninjas and dressed in black silk. It looked like this killer, in his conservative suit, was just as fast and deadly. Shayne was trying to get his feet under him again, but he was so busy trying to avoid the lightning-quick blows of the assassin that he couldn't manage it.

It was only a matter of time, he knew, before the killer did his work and completed his mission. But if he could get his hands on a weapon of some sort . . . Shayne cast his eyes around, looking for the shotgun

Brewster had dropped. Both barrels had gone off, but maybe he could use it as a club . . . .

His hands fell on it, and he snatched it up as the killer leaped at him again. Shayne thrust the shotgun up, felt the man's slashing hand collide with the weapon . . . .

The stock cracked and shattered under the blow.

Shayne dove under the next attack, but he was getting winded now, even more so than before. His body was going to stop responding to his commands, and soon.

He heard a bull-like bellow of rage, then saw Lonnie charging onto the beach. He must have just recovered from Shayne's blow with the ashtray and followed the sounds of the fighting. Now he was running toward the figures stretched out on the sand and crying, "Pa! Cassie! Oh, God, what happened?"

Marlene pointed. "He did it, Lonnie!" she screeched. "The man fighting with Mike!"

Lonnie bellowed again and started running toward them. Shayne saw the concentration on the assassin's face now, doubted that the man even heard Lonnie rumbling toward him like a runaway locomotive, crying out his grief and pain as he came.

But the assassin felt it when Lonnie plowed into him, knocking him from his feet with his weight. Lonnie swung his hamlike fists at the killer in looping, cumbersome blows, but several of them thudded home. Shayne took advantage of the respite to gulp down great lungfuls of air.

Then he heard Marlene calling to him urgently and turned toward her. He saw the shotgun, the one Cassie had been carrying, in her hands, and then she was tossing it toward him. He reached out, like a tight end lunging for a fourth down pass, and cradled the weapon to his body.

Even as he caught it, he saw the assassin regain his balance and strike out at Lonnie. The side of his hand caught the hulking young man in the throat with savage force. Lonnie gagged and grabbed for his throat, and with the speed of a cobra, the assassin slammed another blow into his nose. Shayne had seen killing bows like that before. Lonnie staggered and started to fall.

Even before Lonnie had hit the sand, the killer was spinning toward Shayne again, his mouth opening for another one of the soul-numbing cries . . . .

Shayne was getting his finger on the triggers, turning the gun around, not even having enough time to check the barrels to see if they were clogged with sand. If they were . . .

The assassin saw the gun coming toward him, tried to check his lunge . . . .

Shayne pulled the triggers.

The charges tore into the killer's midsection, literally lifting him from the sand. Shayne saw droplets of blood explode into the air, felt the wind spatter him with it.

But the assassin wasn't down. He staggered forward again, clutching at himself. His hand flipped upwards.

Shayne jerked the empty gun to the side, heard the clang as something glanced off the barrel. There was a brief grazing pain along the side of his head, and then the world dropped out from under him.

HE HIT THE SAND HARD, THE GUN FLYING out of his hands, and for several long moments, he was swimming in a sea of black ink, thick black ink that threatened to pull him down. But then he came back up, forcing himself to the surface, and found himself sitting up on the sand, Marlene kneeling beside him.

Shayne glanced around at the bodies spread out on the sand. There were three of them — Lonnie, Cassie, and Brewster.

"Where is he?" Shayne croaked.

"He . . . he ran off. I don't see how." Marlene was still trembling, her voice shaky. "He hit you with something, then ran off into the trees. I found it in the sand."

Shayne took the smooth, hard object from her. It was a runcheon of some sort, made of the hardest wood he had ever seen. If it had hit in the right place, even thrown with the assassin's fading strength, it could have been fatal.

Marlene helped him to his feet. Shayne checked the bodies quickly. Lonnie and Cassie were dead, as he had expected, but Brewster was still alive. Leaning on Marlene, Shayne started back toward the motel. Both of them were too exhausted and shaken to say anything more. Getting back to the motel was enough of a job.

There was no sign of the killer when they got there.

SHAYNE COULD SEE WHERE A CAR HAD LEFT the parking lot in a hurry, and he shook his head. "I don't understand it," he said. "He shouldn't have lived long enough to get here, let alone drive off."

He limped into the lobby with Marlene and sank gratefully onto the sofa. The wounds he had suffered several weeks before were aching. But then the rest of him was, too.

"Call the highway patrol and tell them to get down here as quick as they can," Shayne said. "Tell them we need ambulances, too."

Marlene went behind the counter and started to pick up the phone, when a sudden fit of shaking seized her. She stared at him and asked, "Why, Mike? Why did it all happen?"

"It's a long story," Shayne said, thinking of the desperation that had driven the Brewsters to a life of crime, the fear that had made Lonnie kill Lieutenant Reed, the love — and hate — and who knew what else that had sent the assassin after him. "We'll probably never know all of it." He winced as fresh pains shot through him. It seemed to him like violence could strike so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that nothing should surprise him anymore. But it did, sometimes. And it had surprised Marlene, too, he thought, when she discovered that she did give a damn about her life, after all.

"Call the cops," Shayne said. "We'll let them worry about it." And then he put his head back and closed his eyes, and waited for it to stop hurting. ●

Next month

Mike Shayne returns

in

KILLER'S CRUISE

A New Short Novel

by Brett Halliday

Don't miss it!

The body was on the floor, its mouth sagging, eyes fixed in a permanent stare at the ceiling. A large splotch of blood formed a jagged circle on the front of his shirt. I had an idea who had murdered him — but I wasn't sure I wanted to see the killer caught!

DEATH PAYMENTS

by PATRICK SCAFFETTI

"HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED BUYING A TELEVISION SET for in here?" I asked, tamping fresh tobacco into my pipe.

Faye glanced at me in mild surprise and shook her grizzled head. "No, Leo, I haven't," she replied.

We were sitting in her tiny novelty shop located in the middle of a rundown city sidestreet. It was nearly six o'clock on a gray Friday afternoon. We'd been together in the shop for the past few hours, Faye's Buddha-like bulk settled on a folding chair behind the cash register and my tall, slender frame arranged on a nearby stool. Outside, the spring breeze carried a sharp bite, and the pavement was stained a dismal brown from a recent drizzle.

"I just thought that a TV might help to pass the time," I said, trying

to sound casual.

"Time passes without assistance, Leo," Faye commented, crushing a cigarette into an already overflowing ashtray. "Besides, I enjoy your company and chatting with the customers."

"You haven't had a customer for the past three hours," I reminded Faye, noticing how her hands moved restlessly on her lap. Usually, a stray cat reclined in luxury across Faye's ample knees, but her latest feline guest had recently disappeared. None of the cats ever stayed too long. Faye liked to believe that they found new homes with loving families, but I suspected that they simply couldn't adjust to the attention and comfort she lavished upon them. They tolerated it for just so long, then set off to enjoy a more adventurous existence admidst the city alleys.

"There's a whole world we know nothing about," I continued. "Think of all the stars we'll never see. Think of all the westerns, the detective stories, the game shows, the soap operas — "

"The god-awful commericials," Faye interrupted in a disgusted voice. "Leo, are you sure you aren't just looking for another excuse to stay away from your typewriter?"

Sulkily, I considered the question for a moment, then decided to drop the subject. Faye was right. As it was, I used almost every ploy imaginable to keep from writing.

I was thirty-six years old, and, when I'd first moved to the city fifteen years before, I'd planned on being an established author by the age of thirty. On my thirtieth birthday, I'd readjusted my sights to thirty-five. Last year, I'd decided that forty was the ideal age to achieve success. I'd even had the title of my first novel in mind for several years — *Michelangelo's Drop Cloth*. The next step was simply to start arranging words on paper. That step was a long time coming.

THE PHONE ON THE WALL BEHIND ME SHRILLED ABRUPTLY, startling me to my feet. I yanked the receiver to my ear and said, "Hello."

There was no reply, but I heard the chatter of a television program in the background, as if someone were mocking my recent discussion with Faye. I knew immediately that the caller was Stan Demptz, the owner of a used book store down the block. Stan kept his TV on from early morning until late at night. A middle-aged bachelor, his devotion to the picture tube took precedence over everything else in his life. Stan knew more about book titles and publication dates than anyone I'd ever met before, but he readily admitted that he had never actually read a book from beginning to end. Such a project would have kept him

away from the television for longer than he could bear.

"Hello, Leo, Stan here," a voice announced a second later. "I was just adjusting the color on my set. I figured I'd catch you at Faye's. You busy tonight?"

"Not really," I answered, "What did you have in mind?"

"I'd like you and Faye to stop over here at the book store later," he said. "We can have a few drinks, and I'll show you my latest purchases. I think you'll appreciate them."

From Stan's slightly slurred speech, I could tell that he'd already had a few drinks. He sounded happier than he had in ages. During the past year, Stan had been plagued by financial problems that threatened to drive him into bankruptcy.

"What exactly did you buy?" I asked.

Stan chuckled. "Over a thousand hardcover books, most of them in mint condition," he said, "I bought Stewart Vale's entire library at a steal. His executors were practically giving the stuff way at the estate sale." Stan paused a moment, and the background noise changed. "Had to switch channels," Stan explained. "And, Leo, there were a few surprises in that library that are going to put me on easy street for the rest of my life. Things are really starting to look up for Stan Demptz."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, Stan," I said, wondering how much of his optimism had originated in an amber whiskey bottle.

"I had a celebrity come into the shop today," Stan went on jubilantly, "and I'm never going to be short of cash again."

"Who was the celebrity?" I asked, my interest perked.

"That I can't tell you, Leo," he said. "But it's someone you'd recognize in a minute. Anyway, I'd like you and Faye to drop by tonight and help me celebrate my good fortune." He hesitated briefly, then added, "Just don't ask too many questions."

"I'll mention your invitation to Faye," I said. "We'll probably be over around nine, right after Faye closes the shop."

"All right," Stan said. "I've got to go now. I don't want to miss a second of tonight's six o'clock news. See you later, Leo."

I shook my head as I hung up the phone. "Stan certainly is excited about something," I said. "But he's being awfully secretive about what it is. He wants us to come over to his store later to show off some books he bought at Stewart Vale's estate sale."

"Stewart Vale," Faye repeated. "He was the man who was murdered a few months ago, wasn't he?"

"That's right," I said. "He was shot through the heart in a room full of books, probably the same ones that Stan now owns. He was a

photographer whose hobby was collecting books. The police still haven't caught his killer. There was something fishy about the whole thing, too. The newspapers claim that Vale had been making thousand dollar deposits in his bank account on a monthly basis. No one seems to know where he got the money, but it apparently came as regular as clockwork. The authorities suspect blackmail."

"And Stan bought books from Vale's library?" Faye asked, lighting a cigarette.

I nodded. "Stan also said he'd come into a lot of money and that he had a celebrity visitor today. He refused to tell me who it was, though."

Faye and I exchanged puzzled looks. "Maybe we'll find out more when we see Stan later," I said.

THE DRIZZLE HAD STARTED UP AGAIN by the time Faye and I stepped out of her shop a few minutes after nine. Though she rarely had any customers in the evening, Faye always insisted on staying open until nine o'clock sharp. She attributed this to good business practice, but I knew that she wanted to stall going upstairs to her lonely apartment above the novelty shop.

Stan Demptz's used book store was near the corner on the opposite side of the street from Faye's. As we approached the store, I could see that all of the lights were still on inside. When I yanked open the door, the loud, plaintive cries of Stan's huge alley cat, Dickens, almost drowned out the dialogue of a television program.

"Stan," I called out, following Faye through the door. "Stan, we're here to see those books of yours."

There was no answer. I reached over and switched off the television set on its portable stand. "Stan, where are you hiding?"

Faye stooped to pet Dickens, who had rushed over to greet us. The gray and white cat continued to wail furiously, as it pawed insistently at Faye's hand.

"What's the matter, Dickens?" Faye asked. "Where's Stan?"

Stan had had Dickens for as far back as I could remember. The cat seldom strayed from Stan's side, and he guarded the store with the ferocity of a terrier. A desperate drug addict had once burst into the shop with a gun. He'd ordered Stan to open the cash register and hand over its contents. As the man was reaching for the money, Dickens had leapt at the hand holding the gun. His sharp claws tore open the addict's hand to the bone and sent him fleeing from the store in panic.

Now, the cat meowed in a frenzied tone, and a prickle of apprehension crept up my spine. I peered cautiously around the narrow store,

taking in the ceiling-high wall shelves crammed with books and the many tables covered with mountainous piles of literature.

My eyes came to rest on a matched set of red hardcover volumes stacked beside the cash register. I stepped over to them and lifted the top one to examine it more closely. *The Novels of Sinclair Lewis* was stamped on the cover. Beneath this was the title, *Main Street*. I opened the front cover and read the ornate bookplate — "From the library of Stewart Vale."

So this is one of Stan's recent acquisitions, I thought.

I scanned the spines of the other books in the set — *Dodsworth, Babbitt, Arrowsmith, It Can't Happen Here*. Most of Lewis' major works seemed to be there. Barely visible between the cash register and the wall, I spied another red volume. I slipped it from its hiding place and saw that it was a copy of *Elmer Gantry*. Lifting the cover, I discovered that this book had a manila envelope taped where the bookplate should have been. My curiosity piqued, I opened the flap and slid out a thin stack of photographs and negatives. As I looked at the first picture, I nearly dropped the book.

It was a color photograph of a nude man and woman. Their youthful bodies were contorted into a sexual position limited only to the very agile and the very imaginative. The woman was incredibly beautiful with fine, even features and large blue eyes. Long blonde hair cascading over her pale shoulders and firm breasts. Her partner was a good-looking man with a full head of red hair. He somehow looked very familiar.

I flipped through the pictures, studying each one carefully. All of them were gymnastic variations on the same old, though never stale, theme, and the subjects were always the blonde woman and the red-haired man.

As I examined the last photo, the identity of the man suddenly occured to me, and I drew in a shocked breath. There was no doubt at all in my mind — the man was Reverend Rodney Lukas, a well-known religious leader who worked in the city.

No wonder the pictures were hidden in this particular book, I thought. Elmer Gantry was probably the most famous hypocritical evangelist in all of fiction. From what the photographs revealed, Reverend Rodney Lukas was definitely in the same league.

Reverend Lukas ran a nondenominational church and charity mission in the heart of the city. His brand of religion was based on equal parts of fire and brimstone and brotherly love. According to Lukas, heaven awaited the devout, hell the sinner, and there was no middle ground.

The red-haired evangelist had done more to squelch street crime in the city than the mayor or the police department could ever hope to do. He'd brought religion, faith, and morality to the poor of the area. Even the down-and-outs never had to go hungry, as long as they could get to Lukas' mission, and his fund-raising drives had brought Christmas to hundreds of destitute kids. In short, Reverend Rodney Lukas was one of the best things that had ever happened to the city. I wished that I'd never found the damning photographs.

Suddenly, Faye screamed my name.

I TOSSED THE PHOTOS ON THE COUNTER AND WHEELED, but she was nowhere in sight. "Where are you?" I called out.

"Back in the storeroom," she replied.

While looking at the pictures, I hadn't even noticed that Faye had wandered away. I hurried through the maze of tables, rushed into the back room, then stopped short.

Faye was kneeling beside the body of Stan Demptz. He was lying in a spread-eagle position with his mouth sagging open and his eyes fixed in a permanent stare at the bare lightbulb on the ceiling. A large splotch of blood formed a jagged circle on the front of his shirt. As the scene registered in my mind, it occurred to me that this was far more obscene than the pictures I'd just viewed.

Dickens pawed pathetically at his owner's still hand and wailed a loud, piercing cry.

"He's dead," Faye said. "Shot in the chest."

We both stared down at the prostrate store owner, neither of us speaking. Vague connections began to form in my mind, and I felt sickened by my conclusions. Finally, I mumbled, "What are we going to do?"

"Call the police," Faye replied. "What else can we do?"

"It's not that simple, Faye. I've got an idea of who might have killed Stan, and I really don't want to see him in prison."

With a grunt, Faye rose to her feet. "What do you mean, Leo?"

"Come with me," I said. "I'll show you."

Faye followed me to the front of the shop. I jerked my head toward the photographs on the counter. "Those will explain to you exactly what I mean."

Faye took the pictures. Her expression of curiosity rapidly changed to shock as she shuffled from one snapshot to another. When she had seen them all, she said, "This is terrible, Leo."

"I know."

"Reverend Rodney Lukas," she muttered.

I nodded. "Do you understand now why I'm hesitant to call the police?"

"I guess I do. Lukas is such a positive influence on this city, I'd hate to see him ruined. But we don't know for sure that he's the murderer."

"I'd say these pictures give him a hell of a good motive. They were hidden in a copy of *Elmer Gantry* that once belonged to Stewart Vale. Now, back to my original question — what are we going to do?"

"First, let's try to figure out what's already been done," Faye said in a troubled voice. Her plump, wrinkled face took on a pensive cast, and she stood motionless for a few moments. I knew that she was sifting through and organizing the few pieces of information we had.

At last, she announced, "This whole business seems rather obvious."

"We can certainly make a good guess as to the killer and his motive," I said.

"I think we can surmise quite a bit more than that."

"Go on," I said, eager to hear what Faye had deduced.

"Let's begin where the whole thing probably started," Faye said. "Stewart Vale was a photographer. One way or another, he obtained these pornographic pictures of a youthful, still unknown Rodney Lukas. Perhaps he took them himself. When Lukas became prominent, Vale must have used the photos to blackmail him. Lukas had access to all kinds of charity funds. Maybe he skimmed enough off the top to pay Vale his money. That would explain why Vale was making those thousand dollar bank deposits."

"So far, so good," I remarked.

"After a while, Lukas decided that he didn't want to or couldn't continue paying Vale. He went to the photographer's house and tried to get the pictures. Vale refused to part with them, and the reverend shot him. Lukas probably searched for the pictures before leaving. When he couldn't find them, he must have hoped that no one but Vale knew of their existence.

"But his luck went bad. Stan Demptz bought Vale's books at the estate sale. I'm sure he had no idea that one of the books contained the photographs, but, when he accidentally found them, he decided to use them just as Vale had. He must have been referring to a visit by Reverend Lukas when he said that he had a celebrity in the shop today. The blackmail money is what Stan thought would keep him on easy street. He didn't count on Lukas coming back later tonight, though. From the looks of things, Reverend Lukas has killed twice now to keep from being blackmailed. But, both times, he had to leave without the incriminating photos. You came across them strictly by chance."

I LET FAYE'S IDEAS CIRCULATE THROUGH MY MIND for a couple of minutes, then said, "I believe you've done it again, Faye. But what's our next step? Even though Lukas has apparently murdered two men, he's also done a lot of wonderful things around here. The poor of this city would lose one of their staunchest supporters if he's convicted."

"Maybe we could hide the pictures and keep quiet about what we know," Faye suggested dubiously.

"Stan was a friend of ours," I said. "Could you live with yourself if you helped to conceal his killer?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "But playing a role in the destruction of Reverend Lukas wouldn't be any easier to live with. He's brought happiness and hope to so many people."

Faye and I stood quietly in the store, each trying to find a solution to our moral dilemma. A moan from Dickens interrupted our thoughts. Faye leaned over and scooped the animal into her arms. "You'll come home with me," she said. "There's no question about that."

Dickens seemed contented in Faye's embrace, and he began to purr.

"Leo, let's call the police. We'll keep the photos and not mention Reverend Lukas' name at all. Then, tomorrow, you can pay him a visit. We'll figure out what our next step will be after we've heard what he has to say for himself. If he sounds guilty, we'll have to go to the authorities."

"All right," I agreed reluctantly. "I just hope we're not stalling the inevitable."

"So do I, Leo," Faye said. "If this city loses Lukas, it'll take years to recover."

Faye shifted Dickens to her left arm, then lifted the phone from the counter. She dialed a single digit.

"Operator, please connect me with the police department," she said.

LATER THAT NIGHT, FAYE AND I SPENT A COUPLE of long hours answering questions at the police station. All the while I was there, I fidgeted nervously, and my heart pounded at twice its normal pace. I'd never before felt so uncomfortable around cops. But I had the pornographic photographs in my coat pocket, and I had no intention of sharing them with the authorities. I was holding back information that probably provided the motive for and the perpetration of two murders. It was no wonder that I felt uneasy.

When a patrol car finally dropped Faye and me off in front of the

novelty shop, it was well after midnight. We watched the blue-and-white drive away, then faced each other.

"Do you think they suspected we were holding back on them?" I asked.

Faye shrugged. "It's hard to know for sure, but I don't think so." As she unlocked the front door to her shop. Faye continued, "You'll have to visit Reverend Lukas tomorrow, Leo. I'm eager to hear what he has to say for himself."

"Me, too," I said. "Are you sure you don't want to come along with me?"

"No," she answered emphatically. "He'll speak more openly if there's only one person."

Faye was more than likely right, but I knew that this wasn't her primary reason for sending me to see Lukas alone. She simply hated to stray far from her beloved novelty shop. During all of the years we'd been friends, I'd only known Faye to leave her shop to visit other store-keepers on the block or to help me out in what she considered an emergency situation.

"All right," I said. "I'll head over to the Heavenly Help Mission first thing tomorrow morning."

"Good," Faye said. "I hope that Lukas can conjure up a miracle to prove his innocence in this case, Leo. But I don't think he has a prayer."

I grimaced at Faye's weak joke, then bid her good-night. Wearily, I turned and walked down the street toward my apartment house.

MY ALARM CLOCK AROUSED ME AWAKE AT EIGHT the following morning. As I staggered through my a.m. routine, I absently noticed my dust-covered typewriter in the corner and the stacks of library books scattered throughout my apartment. It occurred to me that I'd be a prolific writer if only I couldn't read. As it was, I spent every spare moment buried in a book rather than writing. That would all change soon, I half-heartedly vowed to myself. After all, forty wasn't that far away.

When I stepped outside a short while later, the wind hit me like an icy wave. I tugged my collar tight around my neck and set off at a rapid pace toward the Heavenly Help Mission.

Reverend Lukas' mission was five blocks from my apartment. I'd never been there before, but everyone in the area knew where it was located. The mission provided free room and board to the homeless, as well as seeing to it that needy families always had enough to eat. On Sunday mornings, Reverend Lukas conducted services in the

mission church. His services were reported to be the most widely attended in the city.

Reverend Rodney Lukas had first opened his mission six years before. Through innumerable charity drives and constant harassment of city officials for better living conditions for the poor, he had soon made his mission famous throughout the city and even the state. Others had worked toward the same goal with equal fervor, but Lukas' impressive figure and mellow voice had helped to make his efforts enormously successful. His face smiled down on city streets from countless billboards, and he was a frequent guest on local radio and tv talk shows. Unfortunately, the photographs I carried in my pocket were certainly not the poses you'd expect of such a renowned religious personality. Nor were the crimes I feared he had committed.

THE DAMP COLD SEEMED TO GNAW AT MY BONES as I approached the mission. It was a huge rectangular building with no frills. This single structure housed the kitchen, apartments, dining hall, and church. Above the front door, block letters spelled out HEAVENLY HELP MISSION.

I felt grateful as I escaped from the harsh wind into the warm, quiet interior of the mission. I found myself at one end of a long, narrow corridor with doors opening off of either side. The door to my right bore the name REVEREND R. LUKAS. Feeling slightly queasy, I rapped on the door.

"Come in," a woman's voice called out.

I entered the office and saw a heavyset black woman sitting behind a desk. "May I help you?" she asked with a pleasant smile.

"I'd like to speak to Reverend Lukas, please," I said.

The receptionist got up, walked over to a door, knocked once, and opened it. "There's a gentlemen here who would like to see you, Reverend."

"Send him right in," a deep male voice commanded.

I stepped across the room and went into the office. The receptionist softly closed the door behind me.

"What service might I offer you, sir?" Reverend Lukas asked, rising from his chair and extending his hand over the desk.

As I shook his hand, I said, "My name is Leo Reynolds, and I'd like to speak with you for a while."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Leo," he said. "Have a seat."

I sat down on a wooden chair in front of the desk and cleared my throat. Nervously, I glanced around the small room, then looked directly into Lukas' face. His features were rugged and handsome

beneath the massive mane of bright red hair. Though he was now several years older, there was no question at all in my mind that this was the same man in the pornographic pictures.

Finally, I asked, "Have you heard about the murder of Stan Demptz?"

Reverend Lukas shook his head. I stared hard into his eyes, hoping to catch some reflection, but his face reflected only sincere concern.

"He owned a used book store, and he was shot to death last night," I explained.

"How horrible," Lukas said. "But, unfortunately, poverty and vice thrive here in the city, and such crimes are all too common."

"I think his death was related to Stewart Vale's murder." This time I detected a flicker of fear in the reverend's eyes, but it disappeared immediately. "You knew about Vale's murder, didn't you?"

Reverend Lukas sighed and nodded. "Yes, I've heard about his death. There was a lot in the newspapers about it. But why are you here to see me?"

I rummaged through my mind for something to say, but no words occurred to me. Instead, I drew the packet of pictures from my pocket and tossed them onto Lukas' desk.

Slowly, with trembling hands, Lukas slipped the photographs from the envelope and looked briefly at the top one. Then he set them back on the desk and ran his hand through his hair.

"That's me, of course," he muttered. "How did you get them?"

"I found them at Stan Demptz's book store. They were hidden in a copy of *Elmer Gantry.*"

Lukas chuckled without humor. "I suppose that's how Vale filed them," he said. "Leo, if you're here to try to blackmail me, you can forget it. Stewart Vale came to me almost two years ago with those pictures. He demanded a substantial sum of money to keep them to himself. I'll tell you exactly the same thing I told him — I used to be one of the world's great sinners. I posed for those pictures for a few quick bucks and never thought twice about doing it. They appeared in some obscure pornographic magazine, and then they were forgotten. Or so I thought. Not long after those pictures were made, I found the Lord, entered the seminary, and became a minister."

Reverend Lukas paused a moment, as if trying to organize his thoughts, before continuing. "I'd entirely forgotten about these pictures until Stewart Vale brought them to my attention again. He was the photographer who took them. When I became well-known around here, he recalled having made the pictures and dug up the negatives in hopes of blackmailing me. I refused, and he left. That was the end of

it, as far as I was concerned.

"I won't allow myself to be blackmailed by you either, Leo. I'd prefer that you destroyed those pictures, but I won't pay you a cent for them. From the start, I've been honest with my congregation. They know that my past is shameful and sordid, but I've never revealed the particulars of my sins. If those photos were made public, some people might use the opportunity to damage my work here in the city. I would hate to see that happen."

Listening to Reverend Lukas, I was almost certain that he was telling the truth. His voice sounded sincere and resigned, and he looked me straight in the eyes all the while he spoke.

"I have no intention at all of trying to blackmail you, Reverend," I said. "I just want to know who killed Stan Demptz. A friend and I discovered his body last night, shortly after I found these pictures. We didn't show the photos to the police because we wanted to hear what you had to say for yourself first. You've done so much good for this city that we felt as if we owed it to you."

"Well, now you've heard my story. What are your conclusions?"

"For one reason or another, both men who had these photos were murdered," I said. "There's some evidence that Vale was blackmailing someone, and I suspect that Demptz tried the same thing. You're easily recognizable in the pictures, so I assumed you were the killer. Now, I'm convinced my assumptions were wrong."

"I swear to you before God that I didn't kill anyone," Reverend Lukas said.

"Perhaps a member of your congregation found out about the photos and agreed to pay the money for you," I suggested. "They may have grown tired of paying the blackmail and killed Vale and then Demptz."

"Never," Reverend Lukas said firmly. "I know that no one in my congregation is responsible for these murders."

The reverend was obviously ill-at-ease. He shifted in his chair, glanced toward the ceiling, then looked at me. "What are you going to do with the pictures and negatives?" he asked.

"They're yours now," I said. "I know I should turn them over to the police, but I just can't do it. This city needs every friend it can get."

"Thank you, Leo," Lukas said. He picked up the pictures and negatives as if they were used tissues and ripped them in halves, then quarters, then crumpled them in his large hand. He found a pack of matches in a desk drawer and ignited the pieces in an ashtray.

Watching the photos burn, I said, "I believe that you're innocent, Reverend, but I've got a strong hunch that you know who the real killer is."

"You're right, Leo," he said. "With these pictures gone, there will be no more murders, though. I do suspect someone, but I'll have to talk to this person before I do anything more. Hopefully, the person will voluntarily go to the police, but I'll inform the authorities myself, if necessary. But I can assure you that justice will be done."

"I'm sure that you're a man of your word, Reverend," I said. "I have little doubt that you'll do the right thing. Thank you for your time."

Reverend Lukas made no reply. He was gazing fixedly at the last wisp of black smoke rising from the ashtray as I left his office.

FAYE LISTENED INTENTLY WHILE I GAVE A DETAILED account of my visit to Reverend Lukas. She smoked one cigarette after another and absently stroked Dickens, who lay curled on her lap, but her pale blue eyes never strayed from my face.

"So the pictures are destroyed?" she said when I finished.

"Yes. I saw Lukas tear them up and burn them."

"Maybe we should have given them to the police, but I'm glad we didn't. I trust your intuition, Leo. If you felt he was innocent, then you did the right thing. If the public ever got hold of those photos, Lukas would have been ruined. And he might have been convicted on circumstantial evidence alone."

"But we're left with an awful lot of unanswered questions," I observed. "Foremost among them is who killed Stewart Vale and Stan Demptz?"

"I hope that Lukas carries through on his promise and sees to it that the killer is apprehended."

There was no need to tell Faye that I shared that same hope.

LATER THAT SATURDAY EVENING, FAYE AND I SAT in the novelty shop, sipping coffee and discussing the bizarre circumstances of Stan Demptz's murder. It was another cold, windy night, and the display window rattled furiously. The novelty shop was officially closed, but Faye had not bothered to lock the door yet.

"I wish we had a tv set so that we could watch the eleven o'clock news," I said. "I wonder what they're reporting about the murder."

"We'll find out soon enough, Leo. You know how quickly news travels around here, especially if it's even slightly sensational."

As if to verify her point, the door opened, and Officer Ted Myers entered. He was a young, black cop with a short Afro, and he frequently stopped by Faye's shop for a Coke and a few minutes of conversation.

"Howdy, Faye, Leo," he said in an unusually somber voice. "How're things?"

"They could be better," I replied. "How about yourself, Ted?"

"More trouble," he said. "But then that's what being a cop in this city is all about — trouble."

"What happened?" Faye asked.

Myers flipped a quarter onto the counter and helped himself to a Coke from the cooler. "Reverend Rodney Lukas was murdered tonight," he said bitterly. "I can't think of a person who's done more for this city, and somebody had to murder him. Sometimes I wish I'd become a plumber like my dad instead of a cop."

Faye and I exchanged an incredulous glance, and I felt a leaden sensation in the pit of my stomach.

"The reverend was supposed to conduct a prayer service for the mission residents this evening, but he never showed," Myers said. "One of the men went to look for him and found Lukas in his office, shot through the head."

As I listened to Myers' story, the lead in my stomach became molten. Somehow, I might have prevented the whole thing if I'd destroyed the photos soon after I'd found them. I should have realized that those photos had come from a part of Lukas' past he had long ago abandoned and that the reverend was incapable of committing murder.

"Any suspects yet?" Faye asked, her gravelly voice strained with emotion.

"No," Myers replied. "But we'll get the guy. Believe me, we'll get them. He was probably some junkie trying to get a few bucks for a fix."

Myers finished his Coke in a series of gulps, then said, "I've got to be going. Take care, you two."

"We will," Faye assured him. "You do the same, Ted."

Ted opened the door and disappeared into the moaning wind.

Alone once again, Faye and I settled into a gloomy silence. We were both thinking of Reverend Lukas. He had symbolized compassion, hope, and brotherly love, and now he was gone. Another beacon in the dying city had been extinguished, and part of the blame lay on Faye and me.

At last, Faye said, "From what Ted told us, the police haven't made any connection between the deaths of Vale, Demptz, and Lukas yet."

"We hid the one connecting link from the cops," I said. "And I watched Lukas destroy those photos with my own eyes."

"We can still tell the police about the pictures," Faye said.

"We'll have to," I muttered. "And it looks as if we were with-

holding evidence."

"That's exactly what we were doing," Faye reminded me.

"Well, I'm going to the police tomorrow to tell them everything we know. We'll just have to suffer the consequences of holding back the pictures."

"Come to the shop before you go to the police," Faye said. "We can talk more. I'm still not certain it would be wise to describe those pictures to the police yet. They would ruin the wonderful memory of Lukas for a lot of people, and he won't be around to defend himself."

"I know the true story behind those photos, and I'll let everyone know," I retorted defiantly.

Faye stared at me with troubled eyes. "You've already withheld information, Leo. What makes you so sure that anyone would believe you now?"

I considered her question for a moment, and the uneasiness grew within me. "Maybe we'd better wait a while longer, so I can do some more investigating."

"We'll discuss it further tomorrow morning," Faye said gently. "Right now, we're both tired."

I rose from my stool for the first time in hours and stepped over to the door.

"Good-night, Faye," I said.

"Good-night, Leo."

Walking down the block, the cold wind swirled around me. But the weather seemed calm in comparison to the whirlwind of confusion and sorrow in my heart.

A RESTLESS NIGHT'S SLEEP DID LITTLE TO CLEAR MY MIND. I awoke feeling as troubled as when I'd crawled beneath the covers the night before.

Reluctantly, not wanting to begin the day, I followed my morning routine. By the time I was ready to leave my apartment, I felt a little better, but not much. There were still too many open questions, and I wasn't at all sure that Faye and I were capable of finding the answers on our own.

Stepping from the apartment house, I blinked into the bright sunlight. The drizzle and wind of the past several days had finally given way to warmer weather. I hoped that this was a favorable omen.

As I headed toward Faye's shop, I spotted a van and a small group of people near the end of the block. They seemed to be congregated in front of Stan Demptz's store, which had been closed since the owner's death.

I paused before Faye's display window and glanced inside. Faye was seated behind her cash register, smoking a cigarette and petting Dickens. This was Faye's life, day in and day out, but I knew that her quiet existence camouflaged a brilliant mind and a deep compassion for her fellow man. She looked over at me and smiled weakly.

I opened the front door and said, "Something's going on at Stan's. I'm going to take a quick look."

As I approached the van, I spied the call letters WCTY painted on its side. WCTY was a popular local television station, channel 3 on the dial.

A man aimed a shoulder camera at a lovely auburn-haired woman who was standing beside the door of the book store. She looked vaguely familiar. She was holding a microphone, and I noticed that there was a small bandage on her hand. The people around her were maneuvering other pieces of equipment, all stamped with a large number 3. I recognized a few faces in the group gathered around the woman.

"Here's the guy that found Stan's body," Harry Moreno, owner of Harry's Jiffy Shoe Repair, announced. All heads swiveled in my direction, and I felt myself flush self-consciously.

"That's a bit of luck," the cameraman said.

The woman with the microphone smiled and walked over to me. "Hello," she said. "I'm Joyce Fantell, WCTY-TV. We're getting set up to film a story on the recent murders in the area. When the camera is rolling, would you be kind enough to tell us exactly how you found Mr. Demptz's body?"

"Sure," I agreed at once. Never before had I appeared on tv, and the idea appealed to my writer's vanity.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Leo Reynolds."

"All right, Leo, we'll be filming a brief lead in, then I'll introduce you and ask you a few questions." She stepped back to her position near the door. Seconds later, a man gave a signal, and the woman began to speak.

"This is Joyce Fantell, and I'm standing in front of Stan Demptz's used book store. Mr. Demptz was found murdered in this very store two nights ago, shot through the chest. Last night, Reverend Rodney Lukas was also discovered shot to death with a bullet of the same calibre that killed Demptz. Reverend Lukas was slain in his office at the Heavenly Help Mission. Is there any connection between the two deaths? The police aren't venturing any guesses yet."

Joyce Fantell spoke rapidly, but her words were clear and loud. I remembered hearing her name mentioned a few times as one of the most popular newscasters in the city, but I'd never seen her on television. If Faye had a tv, I'd know more about what was expected of me in an interview, I thought as I fingered my hair into place and straightened my coat.

"I have with me this morning Mr. Leo Reynolds," Fantell said. "Mr. Reynolds found Stan Demptz's body, and he's agreed to tell us about the circumstances of that dreadful discovery. Mr. Reynolds." She looked at me expectantly.

I stepped over to her and peered into the circular lens of the camera. Suddenly, I felt a rush of panic. My legs began to tremble uncontrollably, and I couldn't get enough air. I feared that I might faint. Joyce Fantell was asking me a question, but her words were a senseless jumble of sounds in my ears. I opened my mouth to speak, but the frog that had lodged in my throat croaked as if in its death throes.

"Stop the camera," Joyce Fantell barked, and the cameraman immediately obliged.

"Have you ever been on tv before, Mr. Reynolds?" Joyce demanded in a cross voice.

I shook my head.

"I've never before seen anyone as nervous as you before a camera," she said. "Maybe we'd better postpone your tv debut."

I nodded and walked rapidly away. Laughter rang in my ears, and I felt totally humiliated. All I wanted was to escape into the safe, familiar sanctuary of Faye's novelty shop.

Faye was standing at the door as I approached, and her face was a portrait of shocked excitement.

"I made an ass of myself," I muttered miserably.

"That's her," Faye cried.

"Everyone will think that I'm a damned fool."

"The one in the photographs — "

"A buffoon, a clod, a nerd."

" — with Reverend Lukas."

Finally, Faye's words pierced my lamentations. "What did you say?" I demanded.

"The newswoman you were just talking with," Faye said. "She's the woman in those pornographic pictures."

"Joyce Fantell?"

"I don't know what her name is, but I'm certain that it's the same woman."

"Impossible," I protested.

"She's a few years older, and her hair is a different color, but it's the same woman."

My humiliation forgotten, I stared down the block at Joyce Fantell. "Could it possibly be?" I mumbled.

"It is."

Then, I recalled that Joyce Fantell had appeared familiar even though I'd never seen her on tv. I peered at her, imagined the auburn hair blonde, and exclaimed, "Good God, Faye, you're right! And her hand is bandaged. Dickens must have attacked her the night she killed Demptz."

"Come on into the shop, Leo," Faye said. "We've got to decide on a plan of action."

LOWERING HER IMPRESSIVE BULK ONTO THE FOLDING CHAIR, Faye said, "Our basic deductions were correct all along, but we made a mistake in automatically assuming that it was the man in the photographs. Because Reverend Lukas was well-known, we figured that it had to be him. We never stopped to consider that it might have been the woman."

"If we'd had a tv set, we would have recognized her right away," I said.

"Irrelevant," Faye snapped. "We know now."

Fumbling to light my pipe, I said, "Then Joyce Fantell must have been the celebrity who visited Stan's shop, not Lukas. No wonder he said that he didn't want to miss a second of the six o'clock news that Friday night. He was eager to see how Joyce Fantell behaved on the air after their meeting in the afternoon."

We fell silent, each of us shifting the pieces of the puzzle into its final murderous form. At last, Faye said, "We erred because of society, Leo."

"Huh?"

"We've been taught to believe that only men become really successful, that only men have such secrets to hide."

"And who would ever think a woman capable of such callous cruelty?" I added. "But everything certainly makes sense now. Stewart Vale kept those photos he took for years. When Lukas became prominent, he tried to blackmail him, but the reverend refused. Then, Vale learned that Joyce Fantell had also become a celebrity of sorts. He took the pictures to her, and she agreed to pay him off. Finally, she got tired of it and killed him. She must have searched Vale's house for the pictures and negatives, but she never thought to look in *Elmer Gantry.*"

"That's right, Leo," Faye said. "And a few days ago Stan Demptz found them by accident. Being such a tv fanatic, he recognized Joyce Fantell immediately. He'd probably seen her face hundreds of times on television. He tried to blackmail her. She came to his shop that Friday afternoon, agreed to his demands, and then returned later to murder him. She'd made her second death payment."

I shook my head. "If I hadn't brought those pictures to Lukas, he wouldn't be dead now. He obviously got in touch with Joyce after I left his office. He told her that he knew that she had killed two men. She murdered Lukas to keep him quiet, too."

I went over and opened the door. The news van was gone, and the street was deserted.

"Should I call the police or would you rather do it?" I asked Faye.

"And tell them what? That Joyce Fantell murdered three men to keep them from revealing old pornographic photos she once posed for? Remember, Lukas destroyed the photos. No one would believe us, Leo. Joyce Fantell is a well-known celebrity and an incredibly gutsy woman. Can you imagine the nerve it must require for her to report on tv about murders that she herself committed?"

"She probably figures that by keeping in the thick of things and acting normal, no one would ever suspect her. But, if we don't bring the police in on this, what do you suggest we do?"

Faye made no reply. Instead, she heaved herself erect and grabbed the phone from the wall.

"You'll see, Leo," she said.

FROM WHERE I SAT, I NOTICED MY LONG, THIN FACE and Faye's rotund profile reflected in the display window. We made a fine study in anxiety.

It was after midnight, and we were awaiting a celebrity visitor. I secretly wished that our guest wouldn't show.

Abruptly, a tattoo of heels on pavement filled the silence. Faye and I drew in simultaneous breaths.

The door opened, and Joyce Fantell stepped into the shop. She was wearing a beige raincoat and a blonde wig. I wondered uneasily what was inside the large purse she carried.

She looked coldly from me to Faye, then back to me. "You're the man who found Demptz," she said.

"Yes," I agreed.

"You've got a terrific screen presence," she said sarcastically. "Over the phone, a woman who called herself Faye said she had some

photographs she wanted to show me. I take it you're Faye."

"That's right," Faye said.

"Where are the pictures?"

"Safely hidden away," Faye answered. Dickens, who had been lying asleep on her lap, suddenly leapt to the floor and fled into a corner.

"The cat remembers you," Faye said. "He used to belong to Stan Demptz."

"So why should the cat remember me? I never met Stan Demptz."

"We happen to know different. In fact, we know that you killed him. You also murdered Stewart Vale and Reverend Lukas."

"Where on earth did you ever get that absurd idea?" Joyce Fantell demanded.

"You forgot we've got photographs that show you and Reverend Lukas in some rather compromising positions," Faye said.

The self-assurance on Joyce Fantell's face slowly dissolved, and she began to tremble noticeably.

"I was eighteen years old when Vale took those pictures of Rodney and me," she said in a choked voice. "He paid each of us a hundred bucks, and we were delighted to get even that much. But things changed for both of us. Rodney and I both went on to make successes of ourselves. Then those pictures came back to haunt us. Rodney was strong enough and secure enough to refuse to be blackmailed. But if anyone ever found out about those photos, I'd never be able to appear on tv again."

As she spoke, I began to feel almost sorry for Joyce Fantell. To her loyal viewers, she appeared to have everything, but one early indiscretion threatened to ruin her entire career.

"How much do you want for the pictures?" she asked.

"How much did Demptz want? More than the thousand a month you were paying Vale?"

"Vale raised his price to two thousand a month, and that's when I realized that I had to stop him one way or another," Joyce said. "After I shot him, I searched his house high and low, but I couldn't find the pictures and negatives. I prayed that no one else would ever discover where he kept them, either. But then Stan Demptz found them in a book he bought at Stewart Vale's estate sale. Demptz demanded fifteen hundred dollars a month. I couldn't afford that much."

Slowly, Faye pulled a manila envelope from beneath the counter and set it beside the cash register.

"Who would ever guess that the photographs and negatives in this envelope would be worth that much money?" she said.

Joyce Fantell's gaze fixed on the envelope. "They're all in there?" she asked.

"Yes," Faye replied.

In a smooth, swift motion, Joyce drew a pistol from her purse and aimed it at me. "I'll take those if you don't mind," she said. Very carefully, she reached for the envelope while she kept the gun pointed toward me. Neither Faye nor I had counted on this turn of events when we'd decided to bluff about the photos.

The moment Joyce's fingers touched the envelope, a large gray blur leapt onto her hand, hissing widly. Joyce screamed. Without thinking, I reached over and wrenched the pistol from her hand.

Joyce staggered backward, clutching at her ripped and bloody hand. "Goddamned cat," she shrieked. "I should have killed it when I had the chance."

Dickens glared at her, ready to pounce again.

Gently, Faye pulled the cat onto her lap. "It's all right, Dickens," she whispered soothingly. Then, in a louder voice, she said, "Call the police, Leo. Tell them that Miss Fantell will be waiting for them here."

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, FAYE AND I WERE BACK in her novelty shop. She chain-smoked, while I puffed on my pipe. Dickens slept on Faye's lap. For the past few hours, we had sat this way, only occasionally punctuating the silence with a remark. We'd spent the day at the police station, explaining and clarifying, and we were both exhausted.

"You don't really think they'll press charges against us for withholding evidence, do you?" I asked after an especially long silence.

"I don't think so," Faye said. "I just hope the authorities are discreet about publicizing the contents of those photos."

"They assured us they would be," I said. "By the way, that was a good idea, pretending to have the pictures in that manila envelope. But it turned out to be a little dangerous."

"I knew that would force Fantell into showing her hand," Faye said. "But I never considered that she might have a gun. That was very stupid of me. Thank God for Dickens."

I drew on my pipe and said, "You realize that we would have solved this whole business a lot sooner if you'd had a tv in here."

"No tv, Leo," Faye said. "I'd rather spend my time reading something you wrote. Besides, look at all the good watching television did Stan Demptz."

I sighed in resignation; then silence filled the novelty shop once again. ●

The killer's strong arms encircled Major Lansing's throat. A single forceful twist could break the neck with no trouble at all!

Ape Murder

by W.L. FIELDHOUSE

A HYENA'S MOCKING LAUGHTER ADDED TO THE CHILLY atmosphere as Major Clifford Lansing knelt beside the corpse. The dead man had been a large, thickly-built individual with iron gray hair clipped severely short. His dress green uniform, the MP arm band on his sleeve and the white saucer cap lying beside the corpse, left no doubt concerning the occupation of the deceased. Although he lay on his belly, his lifeless face stared up into the flashlight beam, an expression of horrified surprise frozen on his craggy features.

"Broken neck," Lansing remarked. "Whoever did it damn near turned his head clear around."

"The German police found him first, sir." The military policeman standing by Lansing held the flashlight over the dead man's face. "They gave me his wallet. He was Howard Reeves, Sergeant First Class, stationed at the military police battalion at Andrews Barracks. Funny, I never remember meeting him. There are some photos of a woman and some children. Probably his wife and kids."

"Yeah." Lansing tried to avoid thinking about the relatives of the murder victims he encountered. As a homicide investigator for the Criminal Investigation Department of USAEUR (United States Army in Europe), he'd seen too many murder victims and their families. And he

knew he'd never be able to avoid thinking about them.

Lansing noticed the empty button-flap holster on Reeves' hip. "His forty-five is missing."

"The *Polizei* took it, sir," the MP said. "They didn't want to leave a pistol lying around here."

A leopard growled as Lansing began to rise.

"What do you think Reeves was doing here at the zoo at this hour?" the military cop asked.

"Getting killed," Lansing replied dryly. Suddenly, he noticed something by the victim's right hand. "Hold the light over here, Specialist."

The MP obliged. Lansing examined the long dark hairs jutting between the dead man's fingers. "Well, this is interesting."

"Looks like Reeves managed to pull some hair out of the fella who killed him," the MP commented.

"Maybe," Lansing said, "After you've handled enough homicides, you learn to say 'maybe' when you've just started the investigation."

Lansing rose slowly. "Keep the rubber neckers away from the stiff," he ordered, "Especially until the lab people arrive."

The Major glanced around the numerous cages surrounding the sidewalk as a night bird cawed. The largest zoo in Europe, one of the largest in the world — the Frankfort Zoo in West Germany was an unlikely site for a murder. Yet, SFC Howard Reeves hadn't broken his neck by falling out of bed.

"How'd he get into this place after closing time?" Lansing wondered aloud.

"The gate was left unlocked, sir," the MP answered. "The director says he found it that way when he arrived. Sounds like somebody goofed, sir."

"Once again, Specialist," Lansing said, "*maybe*."

Three *Polizei* dressed in dark blue uniforms approached Major Lansing. Captain Knochel saluted the American. "I have heard about you, Major Lansing," he announced in flawless English. "It is a pleasure to meet such a celebrated homicide investigator. A pity I will not get to see you in action."

"Thanks for the compliment, Captain," Lansing replied, returning the salute and looking at the CO2 air rifle one of the *Polizist* held. "Now, please explain your other remark."

Knochel nodded. "Certainly. We have already captured your killer. We found it in the men's room. Wilhem shot it with a tranquilizing dart."

"*It?*" Lansing inquired.

"Indeed, Major." The German Police Captain smiled. "The killer is a gorilla."

LANSING TELEPHONED GENERAL CLAYTON, the CID Commanding Officer in USAEUR, and reported the incident to him. "Anyway, the ape's cage wasn't secure and it managed to get loose. The *Polizei* and some zoo keepers just locked the sleeping gorilla back in its cage. Hell of a big animal. It must weigh over five-hundred pounds."

"Well, Major," Clayton's voice came over the earpiece. "That's the quickest case you've ever handled. Sorry to send you all the way to Frankfort for nothing."

"If you don't mind, sir," Lansing said, "I'd like to keep this case open for a while. There are too many coincidences involved. Reeves just happens to enter the Zoo at zero-two-hundred hours, which just happens to be unlocked. Then an ape's cage just happens to be open and the animal stumbles upon Reeves and decides to kill him."

"Coincidences do happen, Major," the General said. "But you've been right before about cases that seemed to be open and shut. That business at Bradford Barracks last year, for example. Well, we'll keep it open for a while."

"Thank you, sir."

"Keep in touch and get some sleep."

DOCTOR ALEXANDER SIDGWICK GREETED MAJOR LANSING gleefully. A diminutive, white-haired man, he smiled as he pumped Lansing's hand. "What a pleasure to meet you, Colonel Lansing." His voice was heavily accented with English tones. "I've prepared some tea. I certainly hope you don't insist on coffee."

"It's *Major* Lansing," the CID investigator replied as he followed Sidgwick into his office. The room was lined with book cabinets, charts of the primate "family tree" and the evolution of Man, the shelves stocked with skulls of monkeys, apes and humans. "Some tea would be fine, thank you."

"I don't mind telling you, I was a bit surprised to hear that an American military officer wanted to see me," the doctor commented as they sat by a tea tray.

"You're one of the leading authorities on the subject of primatology in the world," Lansing replied. "I was delighted to find you here in Frankfort."

"I hope I can help you, Colonel." Sidgwick poured the tea. "And perhaps you can help *me* as well. I saw one of your PBS television

programs in New York a couple years ago. It was a children's program of some kind. They showed a brief film-clip of some ring-tailed lemurs. Then, the narrator called them 'monkeys'!" The Englishman threw up his hands. "Can you imagine such an error? Certainly, lemurs are primates with prehensile tails in the same phylum with monkeys, but they're a totally different species . . . "

"I'd really rather discuss the gorilla killing last night, Doctor."

"Someone killed a gorilla?"

Lansing felt hopelessness creep into his brain.

"Oh, my yes!" Sidgwick slapped his thigh, "I remember now. Yes. That business about a low-land gorilla breaking some chap's neck. Silly rumor. Sheer nonsense, I assure you, Colonel."

"Er . . . *Major,* " Lansing corrected, "And I saw the dead man. He was an American serviceman. His neck was broken and a gorilla *had* escaped from its cage."

"Oh, my." Sidgwick frowned. "That is unfortunate. Did this soldier provoke the ape?"

"I don't know, Doctor."

"Well, the gorilla is basically a docile and timid animal. It's a vegetarian. If you said a dog-faced baboon or even an adult achimpanzee had attacked this fellow, I wouldn't be too surprised."

"Then you don't believe a gorilla would kill a human being?"

"It's frightfully unlikely. Of course, anything can happen under the right circumstances . . . or the wrong ones." Sidgwick sighed. "I suppose they'll destroy the poor beast. Pity. The gorilla is an endangered species, you know."

"Oh?" Lansing raised an eyebrow. "Why would anyone want to hunt a gorilla?"

"Hunters aren't the problem, Colonel," Sidgwick replied. "In your own country, the bison or American buffalo was on the endangered species list. Hunters didn't flock down to the plains to get a chance to blast away at the last of a dying breed. No, indeed. The bison has repopulated quite nicely and is doing quite well. Most endangered species today, however, are Asian or African animals that have the misfortune of living in so-called Third World countries. These underdeveloped nations are growing rapidly. They have more and more people . . . whom they can't bloody feed . . . and less and less jungle remains for the animals. For great apes like the gorilla, this is especially bad. Apes are among the least adaptable of animals. If their environment changes, they simply can't adjust or reproduce. Also, apes can get many of man's communicable diseases — and those filthy bleeders in the Third World are loaded with diseases."

"This is very interesting, Doctor," Lansing assured Sidgwick. "But what I really want to know is if the gorilla killed Sergeant Reeves."

"Oh, well, that's something that I really can't say until I've had an opportunity to examine the evidence. If I could join your laboratory section, I'd be happy to evaluate saliva samples, bits of hair, fecal material, that sort of thing."

"We'd be grateful for any help you can give us, Doctor."

"The pleasure will be all mine, Colonel," the Britain replied. Now, what can you do about this lemur business on that television program?"

MORE FAMILIAR WITH BAVARIA THAN THE NORTHERN PART of West Germany, Lansing drove his white Volkswagen through the busy streets of Frankfort for nearly three hours before he located Andrews Barracks. Half an hour later, Lansing met Staff Sergeant Ken Mallory in a conference room at the headquarters of the MP battalion. Mallory, a large, broad-chested military cop, held his white saucer cap under one arm as he saluted and reported to Major Lansing.

"At ease, Sergeant, and be seated," the CID investigator said. "You were Sergeant Reeves' last partner. Did he have any enemies that you know of? Anyone who'd want to kill him?"

"Well, there's Otto Hittman. He used to be a cop with the Frankfort Police Department. Reeves busted a couple of enlisted men for selling blackmarket cigarettes to Hittman about three months ago. He also convinced the kraut fuzz to kick Hittman off the force."

"I see." Lansing jotted the information on a note pad. "I understand you didn't get along very well with Sergeant Reeves yourself, correct?"

"Well, we didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things. He even threatened to draw up court martial charges against me a while back." The MP grimaced. "This is sort of embarrassing, sir."

"As your record indicates you plan to make a career of the military, you'd better explain, Sergeant."

"You've read my two-o-one file?" Malloy asked.

Lansing nodded. "You trained as a Green Beret at Fort Bragg in 1972, but American involvement in Vietnam ended before you could enter the war. You transferred your MOS to military police. You graduated from the MP school in Fort Gordon in 1973. Since then, you've re-enlisted and transferred to Europe. It's a good record, Sergeant. So why didn't you and Sergeant Reeves get along?"

"Howard Reeves was a racist." Malloy sighed. "I was dating a

black girl and . . . well, Reeves and I had a lot of arguments about it."

"Seems rather extreme to try to court martial you for that," Lansing commented.

"Not to an *extremist,*" Mallory replied.

"Did you hate Sergeant Reeves for his attitude?"

"A bigot is somebody that hates other people for any reason he can. I resented Reeves' attitude, but I couldn't hate him. Hate was *his* bag, not mine."

"What happened between you and your girl friend?"

"She left me for 'one of her own kind.'" Malloy chuckled bitterly. "She said it was 'too much of a hassle dating a honky' like me. So our relationship would have fallen apart anyway."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about Sergeant Reeves?"

"Only that he'd been putting in a lot of overtime lately. He was trying to get a hashish dealer that's been selling dope to enlisted men at Andrews Barracks. Maybe he got too close too soon and the pusher took care of him with a little help from that ape."

THE THIN SHARP FACED SECURITY PATROLMAN STOOD by a cage of brown bears as he adjusted the sling around his neck that cradled his right forearm. Lansing walked over to him and introduced himself in fluent German.

"What can I do for you, *Herr* Major?" the zoo guard asked.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions," Lansing replied. "I was rather surprised when I spoke to your former employers at the Frankfort *Polizei, Herr* Hittman. Odd coincidence that you managed to find a job here, isn't it?"

"Why do you say that, Major?" Hittman inquired suspiciously. "Because your Sergeant Reeves was killed by that beserk gorilla last night? *Gott in Himmel!* Am I to be blamed for the actions of a wild beast?"

"A wild beast that just happened to escape from its cage the same night Sergeant Reeves was in the zoo."

"I don't have a key to the main gate — which was unlocked that night — let alone a key to the ape's cage," Hittman told Lansing. "Why don't you accuse Fritz Wesslin? He must have left both doors unlocked. Come with me, Major."

The CID investigator followed Hittman as he marched angrily to a door labeled *DER ANGESTELLTEN ALLEIN:* EMPLOYEES ONLY. "Why do you imagine the Sergeant was here last night?" Lansing asked.

"I have no idea," Hittman growled. "I hadn't seen that *Schweine-*

hund since he managed to convince the *Polizei* to fire me merely for buying a few cartons of American cigarettes from your soldiers. To call such a small transaction blackmarketeering is asinine!"

"Perhaps, but it's still against the Unform Code of Military Justice," Lansing reminded him. "Are you still in the blackmarket cigarette and liquor business? Or have you graduated to something else?"

"What are you suggesting?" Hittman demanded as he whirled to face the American.

"Sergeant Reeves was investigating a hashish dealer before he died," Lansing said.

"Damn you!" Hittman snarled. "If I hadn't sprained my wrist the other day when I helped a moron unload a meat truck by the lion cage, I would teach you to imply that I would have anything to do with drugs!"

"Promises, promises," Lansing muttered.

Hittman shoved the door open violently with his good hand. A small, overweight man with a round, dough-like face stared up fearfully from a bench where he was eating a sandwich with a bottle of beer. Unlike their American counterparts, most German businesses don't object to their employees drinking beer. The man appeared to be frightened by the abrupt manner in which Hittman entered the room.

"This is Fritz Wesslin," Hittman told Lansing. "He is the idiot that left the front gate and the ape cage unlocked last night."

"*Nein!*" Wesslin exclaimed, "They were secure when I left the zoo at nine o'clock. I swear, the mistake was not mine!"

"Ah!" Hittman smiled, "And you would admit your shortcomings and face them like a man if you were responsible? Ha! First, you are not a man and second you have no sense of responsibility!"

"Are you certain you locked the gate and the gorilla cage, *Herr* Wesslin?" Lansing asked.

"*Ja!* The ape's cage had not been unlocked for three days, when I last cleaned it, and I always check the front gate twice before I leave."

"Are you certain you were able to think straight, Wesslin?" Hittman asked, a vicious edge accenting his tone. "There was nothing clouding your mind that night, eh?"

"I don't do *that* anymore!" Wesslin declared.

"I'm certain *Herr* Major would be interested in your past." The guard turned to Lansing. "You were talking about a hashish dealer, Major. Perhaps Wesslin can tell you. He smokes that *schizer*. I arrested him myself last year for possession of hashish."

"Before I reformed," Wesslin insisted. "I don't touch it anymore."

"Have you been going to a rehabilitation clinic?" Lansing inquired.

"One here in Frankfort," Wesslin replied. "I went to it for six

months until Doctor Hahn agreed I was cured."

"Doctor Hahn," Lansing repeated as he wrote the name on his note pad. "And who was *your* doctor, *Herr* Hittman?"

"My doctor?" the guard asked with surprise.

"The one that treated your sprained wrist."

"What do you want to know that for?"

"In an investigation of this kind, I try to acquire all the information I can."

"Doctor Kruger examined me. He is a *Tierarzt*, a veterinarian, here at the zoo."

"I see." Lansing nodded. "I suspect I won't get much more of interest from you two today. Please continue with your argument." He left the building.

MAJOR LANSING'S TEMPORARY OFFICE at Andrews Barracks was a converted mailroom at the headquarters of the MP battallion. The accommodations were functional; he'd been supplied with a desk, two chairs and a telephone. As the Major read over a Frankfort Police Report, Private First Class Cleon Smith knocked on the door. A tall lanky black man, Smith was an orderly room clerk for the Military Police Headquarters Battery and currently served double duty as Lansing's aide. Although Smith was a competent trooper, Lansing would rather have had his efficient and lovely secretary Spec. Five Wendy Davis on hand. Of course, Wendy would be waiting for him back in Bavaria.

"Sir, a Doctor Sidgwick is waiting to see you," the PFC announced.

"Thank you, Smith," Lansing replied. "Send him in."

"Yes, sir." Smith said as he turned to leave, "Oh, congratulations on your promotion, sir."

"Promotion?" Lansing's brow wrinkled.

"Doctor Sidgwick called you 'Colonel' Lansing, sir."

"He always does." The CID investigator sighed. "Send him in anyway."

Smith departed and Doctor Sidgwick entered the office. "Frightfully good to see you again, Colonel," the zoologist said as he shook Lansing's hand.

The Major decided not to bother to correct the Englishman. *At least he doesn't call me a captain.* "Have you uncovered anything of interest in the laboratory, Doctor?"

"Not what I'd hoped, I'm afraid. The hairs found in Sergeant Reeve's hand are from a gorilla. Pity. I'd hoped the animal would be innocent."

"If someone unlocked that cage and turned the ape loose on Reeves, that individual is the guilty party. The gorilla was merely used as a weapon."

"Good heavens, man!" Sidgwick chuckled. "We're not talking about *Murders in the Rue Morgue*. The ape was a zoo animal. It hadn't been trained to obey orders to kill or anything else. I really don't understand it at all."

"What if the animal was injected with some kind of drug?" Lansing inquired. "Something that made the ape behave in a violent manner?"

"That's possible, of course, But whoever did it would have to know his stuff. He'd have to be quite familiar with the beast's anatomy to know exactly how much of a narcotic would be the right amount. Too little, and it wouldn't affect the gorilla; too much and it would die."

"Well, two of my prime suspects work at the zoo. I don't see how Malloy could have done any monkey business with the ape."

"Your suspects are a zoo keeper who only feeds the animals and sweeps out their pens, and a security guard. Hardly the type to be sending a six-hundred pound low-land gorilla into a murderous frenzy. Have either of them had any medical or veterinary background?"

"Nothing." Lansing sighed as he gestured to the bundle of German personnel files from police and civilian sources, and the American 201 files on Reeves and Malloy. "Fritz Wesslin spent a few months in a detox clinic. I doubt if that taught him much about using drugs on larger primates."

"What about the veterinarian?"

"Doctor Kruger doesn't have any connection with Reeves. His record is spotless. Not even a traffic ticket. He doesn't associate with Wesslin and he says that until he treated Hittman's sprained wrist, he didn't even know the guy worked at the zoo."

"Well, Colonel," Sidgwick said, "although I have the greatest respect for veterinarians — I have a degree in veterinary science myself — we're not all angels, you know. Now this Sergeant Reeves was trying to track down a dope peddler of some kind, correct? Perhaps Doctor Kruger was misusing his pharmacological supplies. Selling it to junkies, as you American's might say."

"Hashish isn't acquired through pharmacological supply houses," Lansing said. "It's a fairly common street drug in this part of Europe. Since a lot of our younger enlistees — and a few of the older ones — have learned to enjoy marijuana (which is all-but impossible to get in Germany), they tend to use hashish instead."

"Are you certain there was a murder involved in this case,

Colonel?" Sidgwick asked. "After all, Wesslin was the only chap with a set of keys to the front gate and the ape cage. Perhaps it was an honest mistake." The Englishman frowned. "Or perhaps Reeves knew about Wesslin's history of drug abuse and trailed him one night. The zoo keeper left the gate unlocked to allow Reeves to follow him. Then, he turned the gorilla loose on the Sergeant."

"Just because Hittman and Malloy didn't have a set of keys, it doesn't exclude them from using the same tactic," Lansing told the doctor. "Either man might have learned the fine points of picking locks during their police careers. I was taught by a former burglar named Doyle in breaking-and-entering. Besides, Hittman could know a locksmith who'd be willing to make a set of keys from some clay imprints. I recall a case in Nuremberg over a year ago where a criminal used such a technique."

"What about alibis? Have these suspects given any kind of explanation for where they were and what they were doing at the time of the killing?"

"Wesslin claims he was at a movie, but he went alone, so he can't confirm his story. Malloy says he was asleep in bed at that time. With a five o'clock formation in the morning, that isn't surprising. Hittman confessed — if he told the truth — that he'd gotten very drunk in his apartment that night and didn't leave until noon the next day. In other words, they all have excuses that can neither be proved or reproofed."

"The gorilla's behavior still baffles me," Sidgwick insisted. "Could you spare a few minutes, Colonel? I'd like to show you something."

THE ZOOLOGIST AND LANSING DROVE to *der Frankfort Polizei Station*. The German police had the gorilla under guard in a cage in the basement of the station. Captain Knochel, the cop Lansing had encountered at the zoo the night of Sergeant Reeves death, met the American and Sidgwick.

"We're keeping the ape here for the protection of the public," Knochel explained in his excellent English as he led Lansing and Sidgwick down the stairs. "After you have closed your investigation, we'll destroy the killer gorilla." The German cop glanced up at the tall CID investigator. "If you don't mind my asking, why are you continuing to look into this case?"

"I want to be certain no human killers are involved," Lansing replied.

"No matter." Knochel shrugged. "We can shoot the ape today or next week. Whenever you and Doctor Sidgwick agree to close your investigation, we'll be ready to take care of our task as well."

"Doctor Sidgwick has been here before?" Lansing inquired.

"I've been seeing to the gorilla's care and feeding, Colonel," the Englishman answered. "Great apes have a great deal of trouble adjusting to a new environment, as I told you. If certain considerations aren't taken, the gorilla would refuse to eat and probably would be unable to sleep as well."

"Doctor, what if someone somehow changed the ape's environment in the zoo cage?" Lansing asked. "If it hadn't had any food or sleep for a couple days, would the gorilla get surly and aggressive?"

"It would be more apt to become even more timid and docile." The Englishman shrugged. "Sorry, Colonel. I'm afraid that tactic would work with a carnivore, like a wolf, a tiger or a Doberman pinscher, but not a gorilla."

They reached the foot of the stairs and approached the steel cage containing the ape. A *Polizist* guarding the animal rose from his chair as they drew closer. Lansing noticed the sentry was armed with a Heckler & Koch MP-5 SD A3, one of the best submachine guns in Europe. The Frankfort cops probably borrowed the blaster from the GSG 9 — an elite anti-terrorist unit formed after the tragic incident at the Olympic Village in Munich. Apparently, no one wanted to take any chances with the "killer" ape.

The gorilla was a hairy, black shape in the corner of its cage. A massive beast, its small dark eyes gazed at the men from under a large frontal ridge at its brow. The ape's skull was slightly pointed, but its wide, dark face seemed quietly intelligent. Lansing felt the animal was confused by its surroundings. It seemed to think it was being punished for something and it had no idea why.

"Bamboo shoots," Sidgwick explained as he removed some green-yellow stalks from a bucket near the cage. "One of the gorilla's favorite foods."

Holding the bamboo in his hand, Sidgwick thrust his arm between the bars. "Come on, big fellow," he told the gorilla. "You've got to eat, you know."

"*Gut Gott!*" Knochel exclaimed, his hand dropping to the 9mm H&K pistol on his hip.

"Take it easy," Lansing urged.

The ape rose and lumbered over to the bars, moving slowly, cautiously toward the food on its wide flat feet and the knuckles of its fists.

"That beast could tear his arm off," Knochel whispered.

"I'm sure Doctor Sidgwick realizes that," Lansing replied. "But I think he's convinced that the gorilla won't harm him."

"What if he's wrong, Major?" the German cop asked tensely.

"Then we'll know soon enough," the American stated grimly.

The ape squatted on the floor of the cage, extending a remarkably long and thick arm. Its hairy hand touched the bamboo stalks, holding them in a firm grasp. Shyly, it looked down at the floor, avoiding the eyes of the diminutive British zoologist.

"That's a good fellow," Sidgwick said as he released the bamboo. The ape raised the food to its large mouth and began to chew it.

"That was a very foolish action, Doctor!" Knochel snapped. "I am surprised by such behavior from a man with your reputation."

"And I'm surprised that so many adults still regard a gorilla as some sort of monster from a grade-B Hollywood movie!" Sidgwick replied sharply. "Do you think I'm senile, Officer? I've handled primates most of my life. I know how to evaluate a docile animal from a hostile one. I wouldn't have stuck my hand into that cage if you had a surly orangutan or a mandril in it. A gorilla — especially *that* gorilla — is a very different kind of creature. I'm convinced it isn't a killer and I find it difficult to believe it ever killed anyone."

THE WHITE VOLKSWAGEN WAS PARKED ACROSS THE STREET from the apartment building that night. Lansing watched the short, round figure waddle up the stairs and nodded to himself with satisfaction. Opening the glove compartment, he removed a Government Issue .45 caliber 1911 Colt pistol. Working the slide, he chambered the first round and pressed on the safety catch. Then he slipped the gun under the jacket of his Class-A dress green uniform, tucking it into his belt. The Major emerged from his car and quickly jogged across the street.

"*Guten Abend, Herr* Wesslin," Lansing greeted as he ascended the stairs.

"Oh, Major," Fritz Wesslin replied nervously, his bulky frame halfway through the front door. "I am surprised to see you again so soon."

"I'd like to have a few words with you about the case, now that you don't have *Herr* Hittman bullying you."

"*Ja*, of course." Wesslin nodded woodenly.

"We can talk in your apartment, can't we?"

"All right," Wesslin agreed, but he clearly didn't like the idea.

Lansing followed the beefy German to his room. "I'm sorry, Major," Wesslin commented in a loud voice, "but I fear the place is in a terrible condition."

"Don't worry about it."

Wesslin unlocked the door and they entered the apartment. Clothing

was scattered all over the floor, the stuffing hung from a rip in an old chairarm and a stack of beer bottles cluttered one corner.

"Now, what would you like to ask me, Major?" Wesslin inquired.

"Let's start with: When did you first get back on the hashish habit?" Lansing asked calmly.

"I don't . . ."

"Then why'd you unlock the gate and the gorilla cage for your pusher, Wesslin?" the CID investigator inquired coldly.

"You are wrong, Major! I didn't do anything . . . ."

"You became an accessory to murder. That makes you guilty," Lansing went on. "Your supplier had gotten careless and Sergeant Reeves had gotten suspicious. Unfortunately, Reeves underestimated his man. In order to get enough facts on the hash peddler to burn him, Reeves followed the man the other night. He followed him right to the Frankfort Zoo, unaware that he was about to be set up for the kill."

"I don't have to listen to these wild accusations!" Wesslin insisted as he moved towards the door.

Lansing drew the Colt pistol. "Sit down, shut up, and listen."

Wesslin sat down in the battered armchair.

"Your plan . . . or should I say, your pusher's plan . . . wasn't bad," Lansing continued. "He'd lure Reeves into the zoo, break his neck, and the blame would fall on an escaped animal. The question remained: Which animal? You solved that by volunteering the gorilla. It was big and powerful and the type of creature most people would assume to be dangerous, but you knew it was actually timid and gentle so there wasn't any risk involved in releasing it. Besides, the real killer didn't have claws so a big cat or a bear wouldn't work as a scapegoat. But he knew how to break a man's neck because he was trained in karate when he was a Green Beret."

Wesslin grew paler.

"That's right, Staff Sergeant Malloy is your supplier. He either threatened to cut you off or turn you over to the German police again. He told me a very sad story about how Reeves resented him for dating a black girl to explain the growing friction between the two MPs. He's clever all right. Telling me about Hittman was a cute trick. If I didn't believe the ape was the killer I'd blame it on the ex-Frankfort cop with a grudge against Reeves."

Lansing noticed Wesslin's eyes widen as he gazed around the CID investigator. The Major suddenly realized why the German had raised his voice outside the door. He had warned the man already waiting *inside* the apartment.

Lansing whirled to confront SSG Ken Malloy.

When Malloy heard Wesslin talking to the major outside the apartment, he'd hidden in the bedroom and waited for a chance to creep up behind Lansing. Suddenly, his intended victim was facing him with a gun in his hand. Malloy reacted swiftly, his hand slashing down on Lansing's wrist to chop the pistol from his grasp. The Major's reflexes were equally fast as he smashed his left fist into Malloy's face and knocked him across the room with a karate side-kick to the chest.

Lansing quickly looked for the fallen .45 and saw Wesslin bending over, about to pick up the pistol. The CID investigator took one step forward and lashed out his foot, kicking Wesslin in the face hard. The fat German fell unconscious to the floor as Malloy seized Lansing from behind, his right arm wrapped around the Major's throat as his left moved to the back of Lansing's head.

A forearm vice! Lansing knew the technique. If Malloy secured the hold, he could break the Major's neck with a single, forceful twist. Lansing reached back and caught Malloy's left wrist as he pulled against the crook of the Sergeant's right elbow to ease the pressure against his throat. Lansing felt the wrist slip from his grasp, but he managed to snare the last two fingers of Malloy's left hand. Desperately, he jerked the fingers; the sound of breaking bone rewarded his effort. Malloy groaned. Lansing swung the back of his heel upward, crashing hard shoe leather between Malloy's legs. The Sergeant moaned in agony and wilted to the floor. Lansing sighed with relief as he gathered up his Colt pistol.

MAJOR CLIFFORD LANSING AND DOCTOR SIDGWICK watched the ape walk on its flat feet and knuckles across the floor of its cage in the Frankfort Zoo. The gorilla seemed happy to be out of the smaller, restrictive container in the basement of the *Polizei* station and back in its familiar environment.

"I'm glad you cleared our friend of murder, Colonel," the Englishman said. "It would have been a pity if the police had destroyed the ape."

Lansing grinned. "Well, Doctor, you deserve some of the credit as well. You proved how docile the gorilla is. If you realized this after two days with the beast, then Wesslin probably knew it too after dealing with the zoo animals for nearly a year. That explained why the gorilla was selected as the killers' scapegoat."

"But how did you decide the killer was Malloy instead of Hittman?"

"If the ape didn't break Reeves' neck, one of the suspects must have done it. That left Wesslin out as he lacked the knowledge, the strength

and the guts to kill a big man like Reeves with his bare hands. In order to twist a man's neck to break it — as Reeves' was murdered — the killer had to use both hands. Since Doctor Kurger confirmed that Hittman's sprained wrist was genuine, that left only one suspect. Besides, Hittman wouldn't be stupid enough to introduce me to Wesslin and tell me about his drug habit if he was an accomplice."

"Frightfully clever detective work," Sidgwick said. "It's been interesting working with you, Colonel."

"It was interesting working with you too, sir," Lansing replied sincerely.

"By the way, that German policeman, Knochel, said that he was pleased that he got to see the famous *Major* Lansing in action after-all." The Englishman raised his eyebrows, "I thought you were a colonel."

"No, Doctor," Lansing admitted, "I'm only a major."

"Oh." Sidgwick frowned. "Well, why didn't you tell me?" Before Lansing could reply, the Englishman added, "Well, never mind. Have you gotten anywhere with that Lemur business on that television program?"

Lansing sighed with weary frustration. ●

MIKE'S MAIL

BANNER FAN

Have you any more stories about Senator Banner on tap? I enjoy his puzzling plots.

(Mrs.) Eileen Bergh
910 Arthur St., S.W.
Inverness, FL 32650

We published a Senator Banner novelet, ASSASSINATION — MIDDLE EAST, in the April issue. Author Joseph Commings has sold us several more, which are in inventory and which will be used from time to time. Welcome to the club.

Blood was dripping from my hands. It was deliciously thick. Cody was quite a bleeder!

CODY'S GLANCE

by MICHAEL FOWLER

CODY'S GLANCE, THAT CIRCUMFERENCE OF AWARENESS, there seems to be no better term for it, in which so much unspoken was spoken, so much silent heard, told me fourteen things (see 1. through 14., below), in a fraction of a second, without confusing me. And for me, that's all Cody was, or could have been, that glance. Even after I have asked myself, was there more to Cody? A little more? But no, I must answer, the glance was all, all I knew of Cody. There simply wasn't any more. And when I say I glanced at Cody, or Cody glanced at me, I mean only the one glance, Cody's glance, the look he imparted to me. My look at Cody didn't count; it only received his glance, my empty glance. And when I number something as 1., in the glance, and something other as 2., it's only to put into sequence here what, there, was instant and simultaneous. It told me no order. Cody's glance, but I tell it in order this once:

1. I am less sensitive in the morning.

AS FAR AS I CAN CALCULATE, I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN less sensitive in the morning than at other times of the day. Cody's glance stated it quite plainly, that I am less sensitive then. But I knew that even before I glanced at Cody, even before we grazed each other's eyes. I knew that in the morning I was capable of things I was not

capable of in the afternoon, or at night. The dump, for instance. That vast pile of garbage that lies just outside town. Could I have walked through it so delightedly, that morning, had I not been less sensitive then? Had I walked through it, let us say, after lunch, or in the dark of night, I would have been appalled, surely, by the awful ordeal. The dump is not a pleasant place. But that morning it was easy, nothing could sicken me then. I wandered freely, through the refuse, and never felt a thing.

The note too I bore with equanimity, to get right at the note. I found it, this note, that morning, in the dump, torn in two, weather-aged a hundred years, lying right on top of a stinking stack of trash. What the note apparently said, after I got it pieced together, was that I would die (o yes, I would die!), nearby, May 24th, 1956, at noon. It was not signed. It did not refer to me in particular. And yet I found it. Had I done so at any time not in the morning, I would likely have become a raving lunatic. I knew some fellows who would have liked nothing better than for that to happen to me. But the morning was, and still is, for me, a time of impartial deliberation. I knew, the note was not meant for me. I knew, it was.

2. Isn't the weather unspeakable?

CODY'S GLANCE OCCURRED THE MORNING OF MY RETURN to the dump. For I went back again, in plenty of time, the morning of the foretold day. I had rearranged everything for this thrilling opportunity. And the dump hadn't changed much, no, although I half expected a change. Since my first trip there enough time had passed for great upheavels to have taken place and transformed the dump utterly. But no, not much had changed. There were the same incinerated mounds, the same rotten stumps, all the same black pools of stagnant water. As I had done before, I avoided the cinder road that led into and out of the dump, and forced my entry through the dense thicket of thorn bushes that surrounded the place. There were some bushes. Taller than me, taller than Cody, and thriving on decay, they obstructed all view of the dump until one had crashed through them. I found, with a growing sense of reassurance, that they were as sharp and as filthy as ever. But there was a difference, Cody's glance told it me: Isn't the weather unspeakable? That was in Cody's glance too, that bit about the weather. A glance the caliber of Cody's could not fail to have included it. It was such weather as made me pine for my first trip to the dump, that cool, airy morning. And although to my mind the weather might still have been more warm, and even more humid, before one truly

called it unspeakable, I nonetheless saw Cody's point, and agreed with him, that it was.

3. Hope your car is safe.

CODY EVIDENTLY SAW MY NEW METROPOLITAN, which I parked at some remove from the dump, and wondered if it might be harmed. I had taken all the precautions, however; locked the doors, rolled up the windows, and set the emergency brake. Of course I considered other cars as well, before making up my mind; Hawks, Clippers, Hornets; but in the end I came back to the Met, with turn-on-a-dime control. Cody's vehicle, I must say, I completely overlooked.

4. There is music playing in my head.

ONE THING CODY'S GLANCE MADE CLEAR TO ME was that there is music playing in my head. Not all the time, but much of the time, music is playing in my head. I don't know why, someone must know why, there is music playing in my head, but it wasn't Cody. No, it was a mystery to him too, the music playing in his head. It seemed that at the oddest moments each of us suffered music playing in his head. In this case we both suffered; but whether it was the same music that made us both suffer, or Cody suffered some and I some other, I had no way of telling. I was returning through the thorn thicket, disappointed at finding nothing, but nothing, at the dump, when I first heard it. Softly at first, a kind of tangled melody, with tiny crescendos in it. Gradually it became more sustained, but never so sustained that I could distinguish it, every moment, from my heartbeat, or the rustling I made in the thicket. It was no such music as I had imagined before. Nothing familiar, none of that old jazz. Line and figure chased line and figure in a purely polyphonic mode. Nor have I been able to find anything quite like it in the radio spectrum. If I ever did I would listen to nothing else. But it's in my head, I know that.

5. I am quite a bleeder.

CODY AND I MUST HAVE BEEN STANDING RIGHT NEXT to each other when we heard the music, without being able to see each other for the bushes. And what I took to be my own thrashing about in them must have been partly Cody's, and what he took to be his own thrashing about in them must have been partly mine. When I stepped into a

small open space I paused, however, to admire the blood I found dripping from my hands and face. It was all I could want and deliciously thick. Cody himself, who was quite a bleeder, had to admit that I am quite a bleeder, too. He said so in his glance, and seemed to find me unsurpassed on that score, or second only to him. But I didn't, I'm obliged to say, pause for long. Thrashing continued, at intervals, all around me it seemed, till finally Cody broke into the space. I didn't know it was Cody, but it was he. He was wild-looking as anything. Burs all over him, great spiked affairs, from head to foot. We glanced at each other. Yes, the glance. At last it. A bur had lodged right over his eye, in the lid, I believe. And Cody did not stop but kept on going, straight through the space and out the other side, toward the dump. The last I heard he was clattering through an avalanche of tin cans.

6. My wristwatch is fast.

I MYSELF, AT THIS INTERRUPTION, CRASHED BACK into the thicket, only in the opposite direction, away from the dump. My mind was in such turmoil that I thought only of flight. Nor did I stop until I reached the densest, thorniest bush of all, the very stalk of it, in fact. There I fell, bloodier and more tattered than ever, with the perfect realization that my wristwatch was fast. Cody's glance, that look of precision, had so informed me. It said why didn't I try a Timex? Marvelously, I found the instrument to be still on my wrist, and I didn't discover a scratch. As I lay there counting the briars that had stuck in my flesh, I set it back to noon. No wonder I had seen nothing in the dump.

7. Is that your three-legged dog?

NO.

8. The note was not meant for me.

CODY'S GLANCE TOLD ME THAT NOTE WAS NOT, NO, not meant for me, but for Cody. Poor Cody. And such was my relief, or my dejection, on learning this that I lost all enchantment with the dump and did not want ever to go back. And when I did go back, as inevitably I had to, it was not for me, but for Cody, that I did. For Cody was not angry, not the least little bit annoyed, that I thought the note might be for me. No, he saw at once that he might have made the same mistake himself, had he not been Cody, and wished me to go on, to

finish what I had begun, as though somehow I could be included. Yet had I known that in going to the dump at all, I was stepping into another's place; had I known that as attached as I was to the dump, there was one attached still more, then I would have gone anywhere else first. But I didn't know anything till I glanced at Cody. Poor Cody.

9. Stop smoking.

CODY AND I WERE BOTH INVETERATE CIGARETTE SMOKERS, and something about me must have alerted him to the bad effects of this on the state of my health. A certain wheezing, perhaps, as I stood in the open space, or the pale and run-down look I often had. I admit, hacking through those bushes nearly cost me my lungs. But for me the real question that this command implied, if it did imply one, was just this: Was I smoking when I glanced at Cody? And no matter how I examine the problem, even today, I think I was not. I did have several at the dump, flicking the ashes and scattering the butts with great abandon. But when I ask myself this, was I hacking my way through those bushes with a fag between my lips, or this, did I light up in the open space for a quick refresher, or to enhance the music, then I think not. My memory of the event is not in the least important. I simply cannot imagine myself doing either of those things. Nor Cody doing them, even though each of us liked to increase his consumption during times of especial stress.

10. Go back to the dump.

I did, but with no effect on Cody. How could I have affected Cody? The note was meant for him and not for me. I had finally to acknowledge this immutable fact; boring, but immutable. And although there could have been no difficulty in finding Cody in a place like the dump, where any change in scenery would at once be detectable, I took my time about it, seeing no need for haste in my present role. Carefully I explored what signs, what traces, the dump had to offer me. He had not fallen, fatally, from the crumpled bicycle I uncovered in a ditch; he had not burned to death, horribly, wearing the half-charred flannel shirt I noticed sprawled on the ground; he had not drowned, reclining peacefully, on the rotting mattress I located in some water. No, there was no particular place to look for him, no place that was clearly the one and only place, to find him. And yet I was assured of finding him, no question about that, since he could only be at the dump. First I found his legs. That is to say that when I first found

him, it was his legs I found first, just the legs. It was they, stretched out on the ground behind a distant heap of ash. The legs. The closer I got the more certain of it I became. And when I walked around the heap and saw the whole body, as well as, I must say, the body whole, no doubt remained. Cody lay flat on his back, eyes closed, a tiny spiral of dust playing about his hand. I had no argument with his appearance. The beige suit, the tan shoes, the sandy mustache; it might very well have been the man I saw in the bushes. He too, I seemed to recall, had been a tawny color. In any case it had to be that man, since the note was meant for him.

11. What became of the note?

I KNELT OVER CODY, THERE IN THE ASH, and went meticulously through the pockets. But the only papers of any importance that I found were a sales receipt from a garage, itemizing parts and labor charges, and a summons to appear in traffic court, May 24th, 1956, at twelve-thirty. Well, Cody wouldn't keep that appointment; it was one too many for him. But the ticket did give his name. Cody. I knew him at last.

As for the note, I had clean forgotten what I did with it. If it wasn't on me, and it wasn't on Cody, then most likely it was still at the dump. But on what reeking mound of garbage or in how many pieces, I couldn't have said. When these documents lie dormant for who knows how many years, and then suddenly spring to life, they bring in their wake only outright confusion and irretrievable loss.

12. See no one this day.

CODY NEEDN'T HAVE WORRIED. I WAS SO BESPATTERED with blood, both my own and, I was well assured, Cody's, and so torn in every limb and fiber when finally those bushes had done with me, that I was in a small mood to see anyone. If Cody thought that I might rush from the dump to, of all places, work, and spend the rest of the day pacing back and forth in the office saying "There's blood on my face" and "I'm not seeing anyone," then he certainly had some strange ideas. Far easier to avoid going to work at all.

13. How to argue.

STATE THE CONCLUSION LAST. E.g., I am challenged, to wit, with all the checks and balances imposed on you, your individuality cannot

be seen as important. I respond: I choose, to a great extent, what system of checks and balances is imposed. Who I am is therefore a matter of vital importance. Or I am challenged, to wit, if you stay on, would that not ultimately prove divisive? I respond: That division between myself and another, which is sometimes assumed to exist, deserves all possible attention and clarification. No permanent rift is implied in this view.

14. Do not forget.

I HAVEN'T. WITH THE SOLE EXCEPTION OF THE NOTE, what I did with it, I think I can say I have forgotten nothing of moment. But it hasn't been easy. In driving away from the dump I suffered a fatal auto accident; fatal, except that I wasn't killed. I should have been. My car was demolished, my new Met; and the tree, that sturdy hitch-hiker that flagged me down, was critically injured. Alas, there was some brain damage. To my brain, I mean. It was manifested itself in odd ways. No longer can I perform even the simplest of arithmetical computations; no, even one by zero eludes me; or think about anything, anything at all, for more than two minutes before all goes white, yes white, before me and I must rest for several minutes before trying to think again.

These shortcomings, I might add, have meant the greatest retardation to my career; especially, I have been told, the latter one. And it's possible I will never, not ever, recall what I did with the note. The very-brain-cells that contained that information, that whole heap, might have been silenced before they spoke to me. I'll never know until they speak.

But the accident has also had its advantages, if one in my condition may speak of advantages. I now wear a steel plate in my head to replace the smidgen of skull I lost, and those memories that I retain of Cody, which are perhaps all that he wished me to retain, are well locked in. They aren't liable to leak out, no matter how liquefied they become, for the plate is a very solid construction. More solid by far, it is clear, than the original bone. And then these memories are also shielded from any antagonistic extenal force. Nothing short of an armor-piercing projectile could uproot them now.

Still I'm only human, God willing, and I must remain open to more subtle penetrations. Glances, for instance. But not even another Cody, with another glance, could take out what the first put in my head. Like Cody he could only add to, not subtract from, my memory's store, and figure in my brain-file forever. ●

1976 FRANK HAMILTON

Operator #5

In those terrific Thirties which formed the environmental proving ground for a large number of today's old-time authors, the three biggest guns in the Popular Publications magazine sweepstakes were *The Spider, G-8 And His Battle Aces* and *Operator #5*. These three gave anything that rival publisher Street and Smith turned out a run for their money. Only *The Shadow* and *Doc Savage* were genuine competition for those thin dimes little boys hoarded to buy pulp mags.

Operator #5, billed on the covers as "America's Secret Service Ace," was exactly that. Written by Curtis Steele who was really Emile Tepperman, this secret agent for the government battled month-in and month-out to keep the nation safe from master villains, military takeovers and the fiendish intentions of foreign powers. All of this culminated beautifully in the series of extraordinary tales which reported the Purple Invasion — wherein one Emperor Rudolph takes over America and rules as tyranically as any Hitler, Attila or Genghis Khan. *Operator #5* goes underground, rallying freedom fighters *et al* to save the country. This was a veritable blueprint for the World War Two to come. Curtis Steele was as good a Nostradamus of the Pulp Field as any.

Operator #5 was one Jimmy Christopher, a pre-James Bond man skilled in the art of *jiu jitsu*, with a belt of Toledo steel that could transform into a rapier, which he employed time and time again with all the skill of a D'Artagnan. He had his *M* too — Z-7, Head of Intelligence; and Diane Elliott, the newspaperwoman heroine, was the stuff that Nita Van Sloans were made of. All in all, a top pulp hero, a great performer in the clutch, a true giant — Jimmy Christopher alias *Operator #5*.

When I launched the Nick Carter paperback series in the sixties, Award Books wanted to imitate James Bond. I paid that lip service — my real model was Christopher, which is indicated by the dedication still carried on all Nick Carter novels — *Dedicated to the Men of the Secret Services of America.* Thank you, Emile Tepperman.

Legions of Starvation, Master Of Broken Men, The Yellow Scourge, The Invisible Empire, The Army Of The Dead, The Green Death Mists, The Bloody Forty-Five Days, The Melting Death, The Red Invaders . . . .

Thank you, Operator #5 — wherever you are!

— Michael Avallone

The whole thing seemed unreal, me sitting across from Jason as he stuffed himself with bread sticks and threatened me with his gun. Any move I'd make would cause him to fire. There was nothing I could do to stop him from shooting me!

The Last Laugh

by PERCY SPURLARK PARKER

I TOOK OUT THE CLIPPING OF THE OBITUARY I'd done on Edward Q. Jason. I kept it in the corner of my desk drawer along with some clippings from my daily column.

I hadn't done an obit for quite awhile, but I'd gotten the assignment because Jason and I had been neighbors for nearly three years, and because I was there when he died. Doing an obit is really not such a rough job. You gather up all the nice things that can be said about the deceased, string it together with a lot of hearts and flowers and that was that. Well there were a lot of nice things to be said about Edward Q. Jason. He had left a void in the literary field that wasn't going to be easy to fill. There were a great deal of people now trying to do what Jason had done for years, but none were coming close.

Jason really was unique. It was as though his typewriter had a built-in laugh track. The general public had always been with him. Even though his first book "MORE THAN YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT SEX" was panned by the critics, it sold as if it was the only book in the stores. The critics saw the light with his second book, a guide to dieting — "FAT IS FUN." "THE WATERGATE LEAKS" came next, followed by "I NEVER KNEW ELVIS." His latest one, a book on jogging, "SNAILS LIVE LONGER" was currently sitting

comfortably at the number two spot on everybody's best seller list.

Jason was more than a satirist, he was a genuine funnyman. Johnny and Merv did cartwheels to get him on their shows. Jason even guest-hosted one night. And Dinah let him try out all his favorite recipes.

To the public Edward Q. Jason was one hell of a guy. He had money, a beautiful wife, the love of millions. And if he was a little overweight, so what. Fat people were supposed to be jolly, and Jason certainly lived up to that cheerful, happy image. For the public that is. But for anyone who got to see him on a semisocial level like myself, or the building's doorman, or his publishers, and especially his wife, Arlene, we all got to see what a S.O.B. Jason truly was.

I FIRST MET JASON WHEN HE MOVED INTO THE CONDO across from me and threw a party for everyone in the building that same night. He was the perfect host, darting from group to group, enthralling everyone in laughter. The building was loaded with business types, people who had a knack for turning a buck and nothing more. Having a creative soul like Jason in our midst brought a new stature to us all. I include myself in that; even though I write a column that runs in thirty-seven cities, I've never considered reporting as very creative. Some will give me argument in this, but it's the way I feel. Anyway, Jason's party was a grand bash. Even old Myerdon seemed to be enjoying himself, and I hadn't seen him crack a smile since his uncle kicked off and left him another million.

Jason was chubby even back then. His double breasted dinner jacket hid most of his bulk, but the weight was evident in his heavy jowls and thick pudgy fingers. There wasn't a time throughout the evening that Jason wasn't nibbling on some sort of hors d'oeuvre and washing it down with generous amounts of champagne. By contrast, Arlene was thin almost to the point of being skinny. It was as if Jason ran around gobbling up all the food before she got to it.

It wasn't until I'd taken closer notice that I realized she wasn't undernourished after all. She was a slightly built woman, but proportioned very well. She didn't possess a regal beauty but was quite striking just the same. Her hair was dark and long, her cheek bones high, her eyes deep and blue, and with all the fun and laughter going on around us I found a welcome quietness about her. I was the last to leave the party, having spent most of my time with Arlene off to one side of the room playing backgammon.

"Come back anytime, Don," Jason had said as I was leaving, his arm around Arlene. "My wife's been looking for a lover."

It was the type of thing you'd expect Jason to say, laughing and

joking all the time. I'd taken it that way at first, another example of the Jason wit. But it didn't settle on me until I was back in my place. The smile on Jason's face had been frozen, void of any sincerity and his stubby fingers had been digging deep into Arlene's shoulder. Jason's display of cruelty bothered me all that night. It had been totally unexpected and uncalled for. I thought about going back and getting the whole thing straightened out, but that might've caused more trouble than anything else. Maybe Jason had just had too much champagne.

I DIDN'T SEE HIM FOR A COUPLE OF MONTHS AFTER THAT, we just never seemed to be coming or going at the same time. Then one Saturday, when I was coming back from the grocery store, we practically bumped into each other in the hallway. He was with a half dozen other people, all except Arlene dressed in tennis outfits. He had a sandwich of some sort in one hand, a tennis racket in the other.

"Well I haven't seen you for awhile," Jason grinned. "I thought you'd moved out."

"I owe too much on my mortgage for them to let me leave."

The fat under Jason's T-shirt jiggled as he reared back in laughter. "I like that. Sounds right; creditors always want to keep you on the hook."

They were on their way to a pro-celeb tennis tournament. Jason was going to be teamed with Jimmy Connors against Billie Jean King and Barbara Walters.

"It's going to be a gas," Jason said, taking a bite of his sandwich. "Why don't you come along? You can keep Arlene company while I cream those proud symbols of womanhood."

I looked at Arlene, but she looked away. I was hoping for a smile or some sort of an acceptance of Jason's invitation, but she offered none. The smart thing to do would've been to turn him down. I had enough problems of my own. At that time there was a law suit pending against me for a column I'd done on an oil exec and some land holdings he had abroad. I didn't need to complicate my life anymore by wedging myself in with Jason and Arlene. But the truth was I wanted to learn more about Arlene. She'd been in my thoughts since the party. I'd be readying a column for the next edition, trying to watch a game on TV, or simply taking a stroll and I'd wind up thinking about her. Curiosity, infatuation, I didn't know what to call it.

JASON PUT ON A SHOW THAT NIGHT that's still being howled about. One moment he would amaze the crowd with a wicked backhand, and the next miss the slowest lob by a yard. Each was done with

a comic jest, the up-turned nose of all consuming pro, the long slow take as the ball bounced by him. How could he not be liked?

"He's really very cruel," Arlene said.

I'd been prodding her with questions throughout the match, nothing very heavy, skirting the real issue about her and Jason. I hadn't expected the statement and wasn't prepared for it. After watching Jason's antics on the court I'd begun to think my first assessment of him must've been wrong.

"All the hatred he can't show to the world gets dumped on me," she said. "It's really bad when he's in the middle of a book. Each one is taking longer and longer to finish."

I asked the obvious question. "Why don't you leave him?"

"He'd kill me if I tried," she answered, as if it was the truest fact she'd ever known.

Jason missed another slow lob and the set went to King and Walters. He grabbed a towel, mopping his face as he ran over to us.

"We'll get'em the next set," he said. "Always like to build them up a bit before I knock 'em down."

"I figured that was your strategy."

Jason winked at me. "Smarts, that's what I like. I told you we had some great neighbors, Arlene."

She nodded, a pasted smile upon her lips.

"Ah, my lovely wife. We're a terrific combination aren't we? I do the talking and she does the nodding. I sometimes wonder why I married her."

"Maybe because you complement each other so well," I offered.

Jason grinned tightly. "The gallant knight to the rescue. She has a way of finding men to champion her cause."

"Eddie, please — "

"Now, now, dear, don't worry. I wouldn't think of breaking up your new friendship, just yet. As long as it's only friendship, you understand." There was a flash of anger on his face, but it melted away quickly into robust laughter. "We can't have you two thinking about playing doubles on a different sort of court now, can we?"

Jason pranced back onto the court, flipping his tennis racket into the air. He caught it twice, missed on the third attempt, tripped and did a perfect pratfall to the delight of the crowd. The publicity he got from the tournament was good for another printing of his latest book at that time and re-releases of the paperback versions of his other two.

ARLENE CAME BY MY PLACE THAT FOLLOWING WEDNESDAY evening. When I answered the door, I was surprised to see her there,

and even more so to see she was alone. She wore a sort of pajama outfit that was suitable for bed wear or a cocktail party. The material was so sheer it gave the impression of being transparent.

"Eddie's out of town until the weekend," she said. "I felt like talking to someone, do you mind?"

"Of course not, come in."

I got a whiff of her light airy perfume as she passed by, a gentle bounce to her long dark hair.

"Try the couch, it's more comfortable, just push that junk aside." I have pretty sloppy work habits, and usually wind up with notes and files scattered about.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I?" she asked, standing in front of the couch. "I didn't mean to be a bother."

"You could never be a bother," I said. I know it sounded a little corny, but she accepted it with a smile, cleared a space on the couch and sat down. I poured brandies for both of us and seated myself in one of the chairs across from her.

She tasted the brandy, offered another smile and then her face sombered somewhat, her bright eyes seemed to darken. "Have you felt Eddie's been throwing us together?"

The question grabbed me a bit because that very thing had been tugging at the back of my mind. Was Jason in some perverse way actually trying to force Arlene and me into each other's arms?

"He's done it before," she admitted, not looking at me. "At first I took it as a joke. I thought he was just playing. But its all part of this insecurity of his. Like a continual test to see if I will betray our marriage."

"Have you thought of analysis? Maybe that's the answer."

"He won't go, says it will hurt his public image and that it's *I* who needs the help, not him."

I'd always considered myself level headed, with the ability to think things through. But this set-up had me stymied. Jason was playing all kinds of hell with Arlene's life and she was unable or too afraid to do anything about it.

She set her glass down. "I've taken up too much of your time," she said abruptly. "I shouldn't have come. Eddie is going to call soon, I'd better go."

I stopped her at the door, taking her by her hand and gently pulling her to me. "It's not right for him to treat you this way, Arlene: we've got to find some way to stop him."

"We could kill him," she said quickly, her eyes getting wide and filling with tears, as though she'd shocked herself by what she'd said.

Then she pulled away and ran out the door.

WE BEGAN TO SEE EACH OTHER FREQUENTLY THEN, whenever Jason was out of town, or away from home any length of time. Neither of us spoke of killing him again. It was a dark, forbidden area locked away somewhere with the key purposely misplaced. But I thought about it a lot. I went from the absurd to the calculated. I imagined running Jason over with a steamroller like I'd seen in cartoons when I was a kid, and wondered how large a splotch the fat slob would make. Or I thought about stopping him in the parking garage one night and making his death look like a bungled robbery. That year with Arlene had been a mixture of heaven and hell I'd never experienced before. I'd known other women, but none where I wanted to make it a permanent arrangement. The more I was with Arlene the more I wanted to be with her, and the more I knew it would not happen with Jason alive.

Then came the night he called and invited me over for cocktails.

"Don. Come in, come in," Jason said. "We don't get to see much of you, or at least *I* haven't," he chuckled, a drink in one hand, a bread stick in the other.

I'd purposely kept it that way, steering clear of Jason and his accusations which were most certainly true now.

"Arlene, fix our guest a drink, you know what he likes I'm sure."

She was standing behind the bar, and she paled slightly, her eyes questioning.

"Scotch and water," I said quickly. Jason was playing his little game again, a hint here, an accusation there. I couldn't tell, however, if he'd dreamt the whole thing up or if he actually knew about Arlene and me.

I took the drink Arlene offered, trying a smile I hoped would be reassuring to her, and turned to Jason. "Well, what shall we drink to?"

"A new book," Jason said.

"Great. When is it coming out?"

Jason crunched on the bread stick. "In about another year. I haven't written it yet, but I've got a good premise in mind. Thought you might like to hear it."

"Careful, I've always wanted to try a novel, I just might steal your idea."

"No, stealing my wife is quite enough," Jason said.

HE FINISHED OFF THE BREAD STICK, went over to the tray of hors d'oeuvres by the electric fireplace and selected another one.

I started to challenge his statement, but whatever I said would be wrong, would only heighten Jason's suspicion about Arlene and me.

"I'm going to try some serious fiction," Jason said, stuffing his face with the bread stick to where it lumped his fat jaws.

"I'm sure you'll be able to handle it well," I said.

Jason shrugged, grabbed a handful of bread sticks and flopped on the sofa. "Serious fiction is a challenge, but the idea I've come up with should work. Arlene, come over and hear this," He beckoned. "It should be of some interest to you too."

I took the chair across from him, heard Arlene come up behind me. Jason had his audience now and he relished the moment, managing a wide smile, bread stick and all.

"I'm going to call it the 'Fatal Triangle'," Jason said, brushing bread crumbs from the front of his shirt. "It'll be about this trusting, dutiful husband, an all-too-friendly neighbor, and a very willing wife."

"Now hold on a minute," I said, starting to rise, but I stopped when Jason dug his fat fingers inside his jacket and came out with a gun. I'd never been much into weapons. I'd read books where the hero described his opponent's guns down to their serial numbers. But the only thing I knew about the gun Jason had was that it was some sort of small automatic and it was pointing at me.

"I hope you'll let me finish," Jason said, waving the gun slightly. "I've worked on this plan for some time and I'm very proud of it. First of all my wife — I mean the wife in the novel — has always had a roving eye. She has never been satisfied with the love and comfortable home her husband provided for her."

He grabbed up another bread stick and leaned back on the sofa, the gun still pointing at me. I could feel the sweat building at my arm pits, and regretted Arlene and I hadn't been more serious about getting rid of Jason.

"The husband in the novel has always been able to chase off the wife's previous would-be suiters, all except the too-friendly neighbor. Therefore, murder becomes the only answer. The husband invites the neighbor over for cocktails and during the course of the evening the husband shows him a new gun he'd purchased that week. Accidents will happen, you know. The gun is loaded, a fatal shot is fired and the neighbor poses no future problems to the marriage."

"You can't get away with this, Eddie," Arlene said, "I won't let you."

"You can't stop me, dear. You'll just have the pleasure of watching and you won't go to the police afterwards either. Because if you do, you'll be next."

THE WHOLE THING SEEMED UNREAL, me sitting across from Jason as he stuffed himself with bread sticks and threatened me with his gun. Maybe I just wanted it to be unreal. I was totally helpless. Any move I'd make would cause him to fire. There was nothing I could do to stop from getting shot.

"The police will reprimand me severely for being so careless with firearms, but I doubt if much of anything else will happen." He took another big bite of the bread stick, crunching down hard a couple of times before he spoke again. "The best part about this is when the novel comes out, I'll be admitting to the world I've committed the perfect murder and no one will be able to do anything about it because I'll just say I got the idea from a personal tragedy in my life. Isn't that a blast?"

He couldn't hold the laughter back; it bellowed and shook him and the sofa as well. He was really proud of himself; his scheme would work and he knew it. He'd kept Arlene under his thumb all these years. With me dead she would be too frightened to go to the police.

Jason's laughter filled the room as though relayed by speakers, and it stopped just as suddenly as if someone had flipped the switch. Jason grabbed his throat, his eyes bulging wide. The gun fell to the floor, and there was a deep gargle coming from him.

We're warned about it when we're kids, talking with our mouths full. Now, every restaurant you go to has the Red Cross poster telling you what you should do in case someone gets choked while eating.

Jason tumbled over onto the floor, and Arlene started to go to him but I caught her by her arm and held her back, feeling the tremor run through her body.

It didn't take long. I made sure there was no pulse before I had her call the police. Officially, the Jasons were at home alone when he got choked while eating a bread stick. Arlene had rushed across the hall to get me and I had tried in vain to revive him as she called the police.

WE'VE BEEN MARRIED FOR FIVE MONTHS NOW. Arlene didn't waste much time; she even flirted with the bellhop during our honeymoon. Right now she's up stairs in the east penthouse with Samuel Sloane. He's made his money in real estate and is old enough to be my father. They've been a pretty strong item for the past couple of weeks. I'm not sure if she knows I know about them of if she cares.

I folded the obituary, tucked it back in the drawer, and picked up the revolver I'd gotten earlier in the week. I checked to make sure it was loaded. You see, Jason had been right about Arlene all along. I guess in more ways than one he'd really had the last laugh. ●

FILM DETECTIVES OF THE PAST

The year is 1942, and the world is at war. America is plagued by axis saboteurs, fifth columnists trying to undermine morale and destroy military facilities. But never fear, the Junior G-Men of the Air are here, fighting for justice, truth, and the American way. Listen to these chapter titles: Wings Aflame . . . The Tunnel of Terror . . . The Black Dragon Strikes . . . The Death Mist . . . Trapped in a Blazing Chute . . . Civilian Courage Conquers . . . (whew!) Don't miss a single exciting chapter!

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12 ALL-NEW CHAPTERS

Killing the old man would be easy. Shoving his hand into the steam press would do the job. The intense pain would be too much for him to bear. An accident. An accident that would leave Mario with the tailor business and the old man's beautiful young widow!

A Change of Heart

by MIKE TAYLOR

DECIDING TO WASTE OLD POP KELLERMAN WASN'T EASY. He had been like a father to Mario.

Mario Stefano was an all too typical product of the lower East Side. It was a life that started out with a breach birth and forceps scars and went steadily downhill from there. His real father died when he was five — passed out in an alley the day before Christmas where he froze to death. After that Mario and his mother lived with a succession of "uncles" who regarded the boy as nothing more than a nuisance, if they noticed him at all.

He slipped easily into the mold of the teenage delinquent. Trouble in school, petty crimes, late nights out on the streets, the whole bleak scene. He dropped out of school on his sixteenth birthday, had a big row with his mother and the latest uncle, and moved into a shabby apartment on the East River with two other guys.

Things went along fairly well for year or so; then Mario was picked up on a charge of grand theft, auto. It was his third appearance in juvenile court. When he saw he'd drawn the same judge who had tried his two previous cases, Mario knew the jig was up. No leniency this time.

Guilty as charged and the pompous old goat was about to lay three-to-five in the State Home for Boys for him when up steps this geezer from the gallery.

"Your Honor," he says, "if I may address the court? My name is Irwin Kellerman and I run a very fine tailor shop in the garment district — the very shop, in fact, which made those distinguished robes you're wearing. Now I've seen this lad around, though I'm certain he doesn't

know me, and he's got too fine a head on his shoulders to rot in jail. I can use a smart young man in my business. I ask you for probation of his sentence and request he be placed in my custody for the period. I guarantee you'll have no further trouble from him."

And that was all there was to it. Why Mario was chosen he never found out. He got three years probation, went to work for the old man in his tailor shop and his life, as the pedants say, turned around.

Pop Kellerman worked him hard, long hours and short wages, but the boy found he enjoyed the security and responsibility. He learned the ins and outs of the business: cloths and weaves, cutting and fitting, cleaning and pressing. He even started taking night classes for his high school diploma. Business was good. It was surprising the number of people who were tired of mass-produced threads.

Before he knew it the three years were up. Mario wasn't looking forward to going back onto the streets. Pop saw it and gave him a reprieve. He offered Mario a permanent place in the shop. He was getting up in years, had a history of heart trouble, and it was getting to be too much to run by himself. Mario jumped at the chance and swore by the Blessed Virgin he would work harder than ever for his benefactor.

Everything was fine until the old man had his first heart attack.

IT WAS A BAD ONE — HE SPENT NEARLY SIX WEEKS in the hospital. Every day after he closed the shop Mario went to see him, bringing trade catalogs and swatches of the latest fabric to keep him up to date on the business.

Pop finally returned home with a new plastic valve in his heart and — here's where it all went sour! — a bride. A cute little blond nurse, maybe thirty at the outside. The old man was out of his gourd for her. Her name was Sally Lee Springer. She fussed over him and stroked his cheek and made animated plans for the wedding.

Mario was dumbfounded. He tried to talk sense to Pop and was gently warned to mind his own business.

"She's a sweet, kind girl. I want to share what little time I have left with her," the old man told him, winking like a teenager.

Before he could figure out what had happened, Mario was the best man at a simple ceremony, watching the old fool slip a ring on the little golddigger's finger.

Mario viewed her entrance into the family with a strange mixture of antagonism and desire. It had been an accepted fact that when Pop died *he* would take over the prospering business. Now, however, Sally would doubtless wind up with everything, leaving Mario nothing more than a wage slave, if that. Years of loyalty and hard work had been

submerged by a last minute flood of hormones from those ancient glands.

At the same time Mario was strongly attracted to the new Mrs. Kellerman. She was a shapely, sexy, vibrant young lady and she wasted no time in letting him know that she was aware of him as a man. While Pop was still forced to spend part of his days in bed, she visited Mario in the pressing room at the back of the shop several times. She always contrived to make provocative contact, the while engaged in conversations of utmost innocence involving pleats and cuffs, lapels and shirtwaists.

Mario was in a quandry. He loved Pop but bitterly resented his acquiring a young wife like you might buy a new suit of clothes. He disliked and distrusted the usurper, but conversely found himself ensnared by the first mature woman he had known.

Four months after he left the hospital the old man was pronounced sound enough for a buying trip to Chicago and Atlanta. He was gone a week. The second night Sally slipped into Mario's narrow bed and he was hooked.

"I do love you, sugar," was Sally's response to his amazed, often repeated *"Why?"* "I felt sorry for the old guy so I married him. He's got a bad heart. How long can he stand this? And this? Hmmm?"

Mario groaned and gave himself up to ecstasy.

SALLY QUICKLY BECAME A RAGING THIRST he couldn't quench. A small part of Mario's conscience reminded him what a heel he was, doing this to the one person who had given him a chance in life. But his desire was all-consuming — pangs of regret were quickly allayed during each nocturnal visit Sally made to his small room above the shop. Weeks became months and Mario's infatuation became obsession.

One fine weekend the old man was away, spending overnight upstate with some obscure relations. Mario guessed he was somewhat embarrassed about his young wife, since he seldom took her along on his trips.

Enjoying the luxury of a lazy morning with Sally, Mario was shaving when she padded into the bathroom, slid her arms around him from behind, and murmured, "Let's finish the old man off."

Mario started so violently he sliced his chin. "Poor baby." Sally worked at staunching the flow of blood with a Kleenex. "Look at him, sugar, he's like walking death anyhow. He suffers every day he's alive. All we'd be doing is helping nature along a bit."

Mario shivered. "It wouldn't be right. He loves you and he trusts me."

"What's right is *us,* lover. We belong together. The two of us have made Pop's life a whole lot better. Now let's take some happiness for ourselves."

It was crude but effective reasoning for a man waiting to be led. A dormant feeling of resentment towards the old man seethed to life.

THE ARGUMENT WAS REINFORCED over the next few weeks as Pop Kellerman began to grow weaker. Twice he had to be rushed to the emergency room during periods of severe heart irregularity. It was apparent that his ticker was rapidly wearing out. Almost as if it were a game they began to discuss the possible whens and hows.

"It's got to look like an accident," Sally declared. "I happen to know there's a double indemnity clause in his policy. It shouldn't take much, a shock of some kind to set off his heart."

"One more big one will do it," Mario agreed. "I don't know how he stands it when you two . . . ahhh . . . "

"Now don't you worry about that. I only put up with him 'cause I have to. It won't be for much longer."

Finally Sally came up with an idea that seemed to fit the situation. "Suppose he got his hand caught in the big steam press. The pain would surely be enough to finish him."

Mario winced. No question that the shock would arrest the old man's heart permanently. And it was not an unheard of accident in the tailor business.

Up to that point it was still all talk — harmless enough if somewhat callous. But when Sally said, "Let's do it tomorrow night," it all crystalized and Mario felt the warm horror at what they were planning flood through him.

"It'll be a cinch. We get him in the back after hours — you can say you want to show him some ideas for modernizing — crunch his hand and, when his heart goes, call the wagon. Then all we have to do is play mournful for a couple of weeks and everything is ours."

Mario had occasion to wonder at the coldbloodedness of the woman he loved, but he had to admire the soundness of her planning. There was no question but that the two of them could handle the old man.

MARIO COULDN'T SLEEP THAT NIGHT, and all the next day he was as jumpy as the proverbial cat. Pop, on the other hand, was in bouyantly good spirits, and this further nagged at his nerves. The very air of the shop seemed laden with deceit and menace. Couldn't the old

fool sense how close he was to death? Apparently not — he jabbered happily and hugged Sally at least half a dozen times. When that happened, Mario glared and his shaky resolve was strengthened.

They locked up at six; a few minutes later he heard himself uttering the treacherous words: "C'mon in the back for a second, Pop — I've got a couple of ideas for speeding things up I want you to see."

As they followed Pop into the rear of the shop, Sally shot him a look of calm assurance. They had rehearsed the next part carefully. Mario would start up the big steam press, ostensibly to demonstrate something to the old man. Then Mario would grab him, force his arm into the machine, while Sally slammed the heavy steel cover. The shock to his frail system would take care of the rest.

Mario flicked the switch and the press rumbled to life. The little room was shadowy and smelled of steam and damp cloth. Mario licked his lips and began to babble nonsense about steamlining the operation. As he talked he edged behind the old man. Now. One quick move and it would all be over.

Then Pop said something he didn't understand. "What about the ambulance?"

"On its way. I called just before we closed." Sally had left the press and was standing beside him.

"Huh?" Mario muttered. As though it was happening in a slow motion replay her hands came up, quick fingers snapped an ampule under his nose, and Mario felt an acrid sting in his nostrils.

His knees sagged and a leaden numbness stole up his arms. His startled mind churned helplessly. *What was going on?*

AS MARIO STUMBLED FORWARD, SALLY AND THE OLD MAN moved to support him. He wound up on his knees against the press, his head and one arm draped over the steam-slick lower plane.

"Hold him still," Sally said quietly, "while I close this lid."

Mario screamed; it came out a muted whine. His tongue felt like a wad of cotton. He found Sally's clear blue eyes and managed to mumble, "Why?"

"It was a set-up, stupid. Pop needs a new heart. Remember when I first suggested it and you cut yourself? We had the blood analyzed. You're a match."

"You can't do this!" Mario cried. He heard the high wail of an ambulance, only blocks away.

"Total brain damage, lad," the old man wheezed. "You're about to repay me for all I've done for you. You're my donor."

The press descended. ●

It was huge, twenty-three carats of brilliance worth a half million dollars. He couldn't keep his eyes off it. His fingers itched at the sight — and suddenly he knew what he had to do . . . . .

The Diamond Ring

by DIANE CHAPMAN

NANCY MURRAY PUSHED HER GLASSES UP ON HER NOSE and drawled, "I can understand how you feel, but you'd best be careful nobody *else* catches you with that Bowie-knife-and-vitriol look on your face."

His arms on the top rail of the corral, Jack Schuft still stared after Austin Toliver and Virginia Murray as they rode off across the rolling

Texas grassland. Trying to compose his expression into something more socially acceptable, he swung around and looked down at his companion. "What makes you such an expert at faces?"

"I'm not. But envy and resentment I can spot a mile away. Hey, nineteen years of being *her* fat kid sister qualifies me as an expert on *those* sentiments."

"You aren't so bad."

"Bullshit."

"No, really. Take off . . . " He searched for a tactful number. "Fifteen, twenty pounds . . . "

"Fifty."

"Okay, fifty. And maybe do something with your hair . . . "

"Like? Nothing. Hopeless. Dishwater blonde and hardly enough of it to cover my little pointy head. I'm afraid the exquisite Miss Virginia got all the good genes in our family. The big blue eyes, the . . . how do they always describe it in those crappy *ro*mance novels? The luxurious auburn tresses." She exaggerated her local drawl until it crawled like moldy molasses.

"But you got brains."

"Won't get me the likes of Austin Toliver. Though I'm not so sure I think a half million dollar engagement ring and a picture-book marriage to the handsome heir to the Toliver ranching fortune, for which occasion family and friends have begun to gather here at Hilltop . . . " Her society-page mimicry was pure venom. "God, at least it'll be over by the end of the week. No, I don't want what she's got. But at least I'd like a chance of my own. Brains?" She spat into the dust. "Last liberation my daddy heard tell of was V-E Day. Won't even let me have enough out of the trust to send me to a decent school. I'd settle for that. Journalism, maybe. Not one more year at goddam Bogart Community College for a lousy A.A. and then . . . Jesus, Schuft, I'm going to be an old maid."

"Is that a proposition?" Afraid if might be, he tried to disguise his nervousness with a sophisticated chuckle; it sounded like one of the horses in the far corral nickering.

"No, you cruddy carpetbagger."

He put his hands up in a mock-defensive gesture. "Okay, okay. But you know I can never tell when you're putting me on."

"Multiple choice," she snapped. "Always, sometimes, never."

He watched her stomp away: gingham shirt taut across her fleshy back, buttocks stuffed into jeans, jeans stuffed into high-heeled lizard skin boots. But she had a waistline, surprisingly small, and if she lost that weight she would look decidedly different . . . The dangers of

proximity, he thought gloomily. After ten days of being paired with her . . . riding, at dinner, when they all went into Sweetwater to shoot pool or take in a movie . . . Well, who else could they stick with her? The bride's bratty sister and the best man: both bit players.

THE BACK OF HIS NECK BURNED. The smart Ohio orphan with his scholarship to the famous western university, "adopted" in a whimsical moment by his charming, generous classmate. Four fantastic years: the most exclusive fraternity; Easter vacations to Bermuda, Las Vegas, Acapulco; Christmases at Hilltop. Just like brothers. And now, in the two weeks between graduation and Austin's marriage, demotion to best man. His comfortable world was falling apart with shocking rapidity. Soon he would be out on his own, struggling to survive as the most junior hack in some engineering company. Consigned, like outmoded furniture too good to give to the Salvation Army, to the attic of yearbook nostalgia. Forever Austin's outgrown pal from his old school days.

Jack Schuft felt cheated, used. He cursed himself for not having anticipated the crash. The lovely Miss Murray, of the county's next-richest family, had always been there at Thanksgiving dinner, at Christmas. Yet Austin never pursued her. Now Jack realized with disgust at his own blindness that there had been no need to; the match had been a foregone conclusion from long before the first time *he*'d been invited to Hilltop. He looked off after the riders, mere dark specks on their elegant matched Arabians, and hated them both.

All afternoon he sulked on the verandah, worried that Nancy would turn up. Angry when she did not. The temptation to start something serious with her quivered in the delicate balance between vanity and greed. As an heiress she was still her father's puppet, and her husband would be too. Somewhat reluctantly his ego rejected her and focused on all her faults. Besides, he suspected that she would not, for several years at least, be willing to trade her chance for that freedom she spoke of so longingly for a purchased spouse. Yet at the same time he felt sure that in an independent prosperity that *he* provided she had potential as a satisfying mate: intelligence, wit and probably a fine sensuality to be salvaged from her passion for food. Money, only money, was the problem: in her case its presence, in his its absence.

The return of Austin and Virginia dispersed his vague speculations. He saw stable boys run to meet them and take the horses. Side-lighted by a westering sun, the glamourous couple walked slowly toward the house. Hastily Jack Schuft got up and hurried inside to hide until dinner.

THE TABLE SHONE WITH WATER GOBLETS and wine glasses, stars of light larger but less intense than the beacon of Virginia's ring. He couldn't stop himself from staring at it. "The ice cube," Nancy had called it; emerald cut, it indeed resembled one of the partially melted chunks that floated in his water. He began to imagine the gem falling out of its setting, into a glass, unnoticed by anyone but himself . . . .

Nancy, on his right, leaned toward him and murmured, "Grappling-hooks-and-guilt."

He realized that she was describing the look on his face. As he had earlier in the day, he tried to smooth his features into a neutral mask before he turned to her. "I beg your pardon?"

"I know what you're looking at," she drawled, pushing her glasses up on her nose. "Can't fool me. I can actually see the sparkle of it reflected in your eyes."

A glance around the table showed him that individual conversations among the many guests were proceeding uninterrupted; no one was watching them. "Hard not to look," he admitted with a shrug.

"Makes me jealous."

"Huh?"

"Virginia, darling," Nancy called, "I do wish you'd take that door-knob off our finger. Leastways while we're at table. It distracts Jack from looking down the front of my dress."

Schuft winced, but there was general laughter, and Mr. and Mrs. Murray seemed to be nodding approvingly. No, he thought desperately, he wouldn't let them buy him for Nancy. Then the ring flashed like a meteor: 23 carats of brilliance that seared his throat like a laser. And in that instant of painful illumination, he decided on the simple act that would cure him of his sense of inferiority, his desire for revenge on Austin for discarding him, his disadvantage with Nancy and his poverty. Recklessly he gulped more wine.

"I was rude this morning," Nancy said. "I'm sorry."

"That's . . . that's okay." Surprised, he tried to extricate his attention from smug fantasy. "I mean, you didn't offend me or anything."

"Well, if I'm nice, then usually guys think I'm playing up to them. And that makes them uncomfortable. You know, if *Nancy* plays up to a guy, he must be a real loser, 'cause who but a nerd would go for *her*." She looked down; behind her glasses long lashes veiled her glance. "And that isn't the way it is. Not this time, anyhow." Then she faced him again, bold and bright. "You see, if I didn't like you at all, then I could be ever so sweet. Carpetbagger."

He moved his knee until it touched hers.

She smiled. "Greenhorn Yankee," she said.

LATER, IN FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS THAT HAD SUDDENLY become dream-like and menacing, Jack Schuft crept out of the house and began to search for Nancy. Despite the starry warm night, cold sweat slithered down his back. He found her, finally, leaning against the shadowed trunk of a tall cottonwood in the grove behind the house.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," he blurted.

"Not quite, obviously."

"Nancy, let's clear out of here. You and me. Right now."

She looked at him sidelong. "Oh, is there a good double feature at the Bijou we gonna see?"

"A lot further than that." He took hold of her upper arm and pulled her toward him. "But you've got to make up your mind quick. I can't stick around. Come on. You, me and a half million dollars worth of hot ice."

"You sound like a gangster in a grade-B flick."

Schuft gulped. "I feel like one. And I'm not sure I like it. But it's too late now.Well, what do you say? Even if we fence it for only half of what it's worth, we can have ten great years in Costa Rica." He extended his left hand and opened it slowly. The ring gleamed in the cup of his palm like the eyes of some small fierce animal at bay.

Nancy stared at it for two or three seconds. "You idiot," she said softly. "You goddam stupid blundering idiot."

His hysterical giggle trailed off thinly. "According to your own system, described at dinner, that should be about equal to an admission that you love me."

"Oh, Jack. Oh, God." She put her arms around him. "Don't you know it's a fake."

"Wh-what?" The ground seemed to quake dangerously under him.

"They're rich and vulgar, but they're not stupid. She wears it all the time, everywhere, didn't you see that? You haven't seen her take it off once the whole time, have you? But not even my beautiful marshmallow-headed sister would risk the real thing that way. It's one of those expensive fakes that nobody can tell from the real thing but an expert. Haven't you seen the ads for them? Bonaparte Jewels, they call them. Not cheap, two or three hundred dollars a carat. And that's all that thing is. The real one's in a bank vault in Sweetwater."

"It . . . it never occurred to me. You're right. I *am* an idiot. Maybe I could tell them I was drunk."

"That won't go down, don't you believe it. Give it to me."

Numb, he dropped the ring into her hand "Nancy . . . . "

"I'll figure out some way to get it back to Virginia without her know-

ing what happened. Where'd you get it?''

''Off her dressing table.''

''Well, maybe I'll put it underneath, like it fell off the edge and rolled there. I don't know. You just go to your room and stay there until breakfast tomorrow, 'cause if anybody sees your face now they'll *know* something's wrong. And if she notices it's missing, there'll be no ducking the trouble.''

''Maybe they'll think one of the servants took it.''

''Maybe.''

''I feel like throwing up. Listen, why don't I just give it back and say I'm sorry.''

''Oh, sure. You don't now them like I do. The materialistic bastards will crucify you. Just do as I say. *Please.* '' She pulled him toward the house.

''But if they catch you with it . . . . ''

''Don't you suppose that I can come up with *some* line for them? *You* sure couldn't tell Virginia that you were just trying it on to see how it looked. Shush now. Come on in this way.''

They crossed an unlighted, vine-draped patio and slid back the arcadia door.

''Where are they all?'' Nancy whispered.

''Still at the pool, I think. And old Toliver and the couple that came up from Blackwell are at the stables. And . . . . ''

''All right. Go on, go on.'' She pushed him ahead of her toward the bedroom wing of the big house.

''Here. This is my room.''

She smiled. ''I'll remember that.''

''Good luck, Nancy.''

''Thanks. Carpetbagger.''

HE CLOSED THE DOOR GENTLY AND STOOD LEANING against it, weak-kneed. Her footsteps retreated. After a moment he staggered to the bed and fell on it. His head pounded. A noise, vague and remote, filtered through to his consciousness: the sound of Nancy's MG starting up and sprinting away.

''Nancy?'' he said aloud, struggling to sit up, fighting against the nauseating backlash of too much wine. His fingers wandered into his mouth and he gnawed them in disbelieving misery.

Sometime later, more distinctly, he heard the sound of several vehicles at the front of the house punctuated with shouted goodnights and goodbyes between hosts and guests. And then everything was quiet. ●

The first slug hit his tire. The second slammed into the windshield. Another plowed into the seat beside him. He had to outrun the man with the high-powered rifle — or he was a dead man!

The Hillsman

by JOHN C. BOLAND

AT FIRST, MARLEY THOUGHT IT WAS A BLOWOUT. Pushing sixty on the narrow county blacktop, eager for the river that marked the halfway point home, he glimpsed fragments of tire flying past his window. The wheel rim screamed on the pavement.

An instant later, he was off the road, ripping through high summer grass. As the car settled into the ditch, an invisible fist drove through the windshield, blowing glass into his face.

This time, he heard the shot. Another slug plowed through the seat beside his shoulder. *Whumpf!*

He flung the door open and dropped to the ground. Pebbled glass spilled from his hair. His cheeks stung from dozens of small cuts.

On his haunches, when no further shots came, he crept up the slope until he could peek over the edge of the ditch.

The hump-spined road rolled empty and silent down through a mile of thick-wooded bottomland. Stillness was a presence, so forceful that it seemed the rifle shots had never intruded.

No one advanced on the road. That was some assurance. It wasn't, of course, a guarantee that the maniac wasn't crashing through the trees just a few yards back from the road, bearing down for the kill.

Critical seconds escaped while he dithered. He saw nothing. Then, a football field's length away, a bush near the ditch shook briefly, as if brushed in passing.

MARLEY FLICKED A GLANCE ALONG THE GLASS—SPATTERED

front seat. His sample case and order book had pitched onto the floor. There was no help there. Nor any in the glove compartment. He sold pesticides, not gems. Didn't carry a gun.

Now he wished that he had.

For days, as he drove through his dirt-poor rural territory, newspapers and television had screamed the deeds of the Elmer County sniper. First the truck driver on Monday; that was the day Marley worked Grasonville and Hopewell. Then four more over the next three days, including a farmer and a housewife within five minutes of each other on the main highway. By then, one reporter had dubbed the sniper "The Hillsman," and the others had picked it up.

By Saturday morning, when Marley left Morgantown for the drive home, the death count stood at eight and no road in Elmer County was considered safe.

Even before abandoning the highway for the Route 3 blacktop, he had felt alone and exposed. Except for scattered National Guard trucks, state police cars and sheriff's cruisers, the roads were virtually deserted. The official vehicles moved slowly, as if patrolling a hostile frontier.

Carrie had warned him. The fact that his wife delivered the caution with the same oracular whine that predicted imminent doom with every rainstorm only hardened his determination not to be swayed.

"Even a lunatic wouldn't expect to find many targets on Route 3," he snorted. Then he cut short her shrilling protest by hanging up the phone.

HE SAW NO FURTHER MOVEMENT FROM THE WOODS.

Scrambling into the open, he kicked off like a starter from blocks. Expecting at any moment the numbing blow.

Instead, he reached the trees.

So far, if the press accounts were accurate, he had been incredibly lucky. The Hillsman had managed to elude even fleeting contact with the police or guardsmen. And no driver who might have glimpsed him had lived to face a television camera.

That privilege had been claimed by some fleet-footed local politicians, who denounced the state legislature for its stinginess. "This fiend woulda been caught by now," Sheriff Harry Hawkes cried, "if they hadn't cut my budget to shreds." A bill high-balled it through the legislature granting a hefty special appropriation for Elmer County law enforcement. It came about thirty minutes too late for victim number six.

Marley crouched beside a mangy pine. The woods thickened within

a few steps. Anyone could lurk there.

He sprinted for the deepest growth. Too late, a rifle slug beat through the leaves, snapping twigs.

He covered fifty yards without hearing another shot. But as he crouched for breath on the other side of a small hump tangled with prickly vines, a crackle and whisper of feet followed.

It was then that he figured out his only chance.

Doubling back.

THE DIRT ROAD WAS NARROW AND RAIN-EATEN. In the middle, the sheriff's car squatted like a derelict. As Marley emerged from the woods, the two officers standing behind it sized him up only for a moment before lowering their weapons. One rifle, one shotgun — they were taking no chances.

The shorter man, pot-bellied, pink-faced, who cradled the shotgun, said: "Your name wouldn't be Marley, would it?"

When Marley's mouth dropped open silently, the man grinned. "I'm Sheriff Hawkes. Got a call from a nervous housewife. She said you'd be coming this way."

The taller deputy wiped a brown-sleeved arm across his forehead. "Not many folks darin' to travel through Elmer County this weekend."

"I was crazy to try it myself," Marley admitted. "My car's in a ditch a mile up Route 3. Did you hear the shots?"

The Sheriff nodded. "Come on, we'll give you a ride back. See if you need a tow truck."

"The Hillsman could still be around."

"Not likely. He's a shy one." As they climbed into the battered cruiser, Sheriff Hawkes said: "Sure wished we had air conditioning. This is Deputy Jeff, by the way."

Jeff stacked the rifle and Hawkes' shotgun in the back seat, next to Marley.

"Maybe we will, with that new expropriation," Hawkes consoled himself. "That and new cars, more men. Better radio." He whacked the silent box on the dashboard as Jeff rocked them along on a carpet of dust to the juncture with Route 3.

MARLEY'S CAR WAS COLD AND STILL.

The Sheriff looked at the shredded tire hanging from the rim. "Got a spare?"

"Can I drive it with the windshield out?"

"We'll escort you as far as the next service station." Hawkes sidestepped down to the door. "Ain't too steep here. Climb in, see if

you can get her back on the road."

"Don't bet on it," Marley said. He used a handkerchief to sweep glass from the seat, slid behind the wheel. "Keep a lookout, will you. One brush with that s.o.b. was enough."

Hawkes shouted over his shoulder, "Jeff, you keep an eye peeled. Start her up, Mr. Marley."

He turned the key in the lock, and the starter whirred furiously. A moment later, it make a ticking noise and quit. He looked out. Hawkes shrugged philosophically. At the top of the ditch, the cruiser sat alone. Jeff wasn't in sight.

"Your partner's gone off," Marley said. Then he spotted the rail-thin figure walking down the road.

"He must have seen something."

"He'd better be careful." Marley had a sudden vision of the two lawmen lying dead, the madman approaching leisurely.

"He can take care of himself. He's a good policeman." Hawkes called, "Can't get it started, Jeff!"

The tall deputy stopped, sketched a wave.

Marley locked the ignition, swung his feet up.

"You just wait there, out of harm's way," Sheriff Hawkes advised. "You know, it's a funny thing, Mr. Marley. If you don't have a lot of crime like in the cities, no one up in the capital takes any notice of you. Like our department, going to pot. Know what I mean?"

"I guess."

"Don't sound like you really care. But good law enforcement's important to every citizen."

"Sure."

"I mean, we gotta be prepared to pay for our police protection, even when it hurts." Hawkes' bulk filled the door.

What is this, Marley wondered, a shakedown?

Hawkes whistled. "Damn! Would you look down the road!"

From the red, squinting face, his eyes snapped to the uniformed figure on the blacktop. Jeff had raised his rifle.

"Don't mean nothing to an outsider like you," Hawkes said. "But I been sheriff fourteen years and I love this county. Want what's best for it."

A sudden, sourceless hammer blow smashed Marley's chest. He felt himself sliding down in the seat. The rifle shot echoed until it was swamped by the roaring in his ears. When that faded, he heard nothing more.

"The Hillsman's killed himself another one," Hawkes said. "Thank the Lord." ●

He'd come halfway across the country in a stolen auto to keep his appointment after twenty years. With a drug charge hanging over his head, he couldn't stay in one place more than a half hour. But he wanted to see his old friend. And even the cops weren't going to stop him from that!

Postponement

by MAX F. HARRIS

JOE PEARSON PULLED HIS BATTERED HAT DEEP over his lean weathered forehead as he passed the corner of the old hotel and crossed the avenue. A light drizzle was falling, souping up the street lights, but he hugged the shadows of the trees. There might be a police flyer out on him. He didn't know; he hadn't stopped for twenty hours to attempt a check.

He tramped quietly along the sidewalk hunching his wiry frame against the drizzle, his sharp-pointed chin down in his rumpled coat but his thin gray eyes up. He was moving beside a city park that hadn't changed a hair in twenty years that he could see. Beyond the border of ancient frayed oaks and a statue here and there, the park was mostly grass, where kids played baseball and families picnicked and the national guard assembled on parade days.

He had played baseball there with Garr Shaefer, Garr the pitcher and him the catcher, and later, when less than twenty, had been a

sergeant like Garr in the national guard. And he and his widowed mother had picnicked often with Garr's folks on the grassy field.

The drizzle and darkness had shooed most people off the streets, which was perfect, Joe thought, glancing cautiously back over his shoulder. All he saw was a couple under the old hotel's awning trying to hail a cab and a cop going inside the hotel through its revolving door. He jerked his eyes from the cop with a thump of his heart, but he felt no urge to flee; he would just have to take it easy.

In the distance ahead, across a dark street of warehouses, the old familiar river churned. Joe heard the water faintly, flowing toward the ocean. He and Garr had worked on shrimp boats in the marshy creeks of the river during the summers, he remembered. Those had been good summers. Whenever he thought about them, there had always been Garr Shaefer.

MIDWAY ALONG THE PARK, THE WROUGHT-IRON BENCH that Joe had been looking for reared up in the drizzle. Beside it sprouted camellias that framed out and circled back around a square granite shaft with a copper soldier clutching a rifle on top. Joe looked at the wet bench. Twenty years hadn't changed its dark color. He sat down on it, mindless of the moisture, his eyes alert.

Then he moved over into the dark shadow of a camellia bush almost a tree and glanced at his wristwatch. Quarter to twelve. He was fifteen minutes early, had planned it that way. He breathed deep and peered across the street. The names of the stores looming through the drizzle looked new to him, but the street looked the same.

He dropped his shoulders and stuck his chin in his hand. He wondered if some guys would think he was a freak for taking such chances, even busting out from behind bars to make the trip. It was worth the chances to see Garr again, for Garr was the best friend he'd ever had, and maybe Garr would have some hints that might help him. But, so what? What if it turned out Garr had forgot the get-together? Twenty years is a long time. His mind slipped back that twenty years to the old hotel's coffee shop after a Labor Day parade in which the national guard brought up the rear.

"If you're dead set you can do better elsewhere, I won t try to stop you," Garr said, a big guy with hard cheeks, muscled-up shoulders and thick black hair cut like a marine's. He looked tough, tougher than he was, Joe had always thought, and was as straight as a rail about everything.

"I've cleaned up everything here as of today," Joe said. "Why not get out? What's here for me, really?"

"Okay," Garr said. "You've talked it long enough, especially since your mom died last year. But, listen, Joe, I've got an idea. No matter what, we'll meet right here twenty years from this day — what say?"

"Why, Garr?"

"Oh, just for the old times — to celebrate if we have reason, to give a helping hand if not; oh, no matter what, just to catch up."

"I've heard of army buddies and traveling salesmen making plans like that," Joe said, "but I always figured they didn't work out."

"We'll make this work out, Joe. It's Labor Day — easy to remember."

Joe studied. "Here in this coffee shop, Garr?"

"Sure, unless you've got something better."

Joe scrubbed his chin. "What if this hotel goes down like most of its sisters? The park across the street will always be there. Let's meet at the bench in front of the guy with the gun."

Garr nodded with a grin. "What time?"

"Well, we're both night owls. Midnight?"

"Sure. That keeps it simple. Labor Day's end, twenty years."

THEY HAD SHAKEN ON IT AND LEFT THE COFFEE SHOP. A simple man's agreement — affirmed again the next day when Garr saw him off in his newly-washed Ford. He had remembered it building time in California and then in Colorado. But now, although he had come across the country in a stolen auto, he halfway wished that Garr somehow through the years had forgotten it. Only that wasn't like Garr. He wondered how Garr would come up, looking down the street — most likely in a car because of the drizzle.

Joe had made up his mind hours ago that he would give Garr until twelve-fifteen and not another second. It would be too dangerous. With a marijuana charge still over his head in California, he didn't stay any place over a half-hour unless well-hidden. And his break-out in Colorado had made him doubly jumpy. Damn grass, he thought, base of his troubles — a simple weed that the establishment was going to get rich on in a few years. Well, Garr didn't have to know about that, but if it did come out Garr would understand.

Suddenly a city bus came along from the river with no passengers, splashed water from the curb toward his feet, slowed and then swerved around the corner and down the avenue in front of the old hotel. Joe saw no one except the cop who had gone into the hotel. He was now coming out of it. He adjusted his visor to the drizzle and crossed the avenue toward the park. Then he was coming along the park twirling a billy on a leather strap.

Joe hunched down and wished he was in the stolen auto parked in a dark alley beyond the hotel. But then he got his thoughts under control. He reached inside his coat for a crumpled cigarette, fired it, yanked his hat deep over his face and blew out plumes like he was resting. He heard the cop and then saw his legs pass him without a hitch in their strides.

Joe shot out a plume and a short sigh of relief, looking at his watch. Five till twelve. Listening to the fading hishes of the cop's brogans, he peered across the street, studying. A department store took up the first quarter of the block. Then came a men's store and a flower shop, followed by a furniture store with a light burning deep inside it, and then on the corner a tire store with a big pulley door. The cop had gotten even with the tire store and was looking toward the river. Then he was looking up at blurred street lights and writing on a pad. Then he twisted around and started back up the sidewalk beside the park.

Joe flicked his duck into the street. Watching the cop, he rose cautiously, hunched down and tramped behind the bench; there was no percentages in asking for questions from the cop the second time around. Hugging the shadows of the camellias, he started around the square granite shaft, glancing up at the guy with the gun, a Confederate crouched for the kill.

No reason to run, he told himself. Just take it easy. He coughed quietly and reached for a smoke, firing up as the cop reached the bench. The cop hesitated and glanced at him past the granite shaft. Joe dropped his eyes and spat out clouds of smoke. The cop tramped on, his brogans squeaking through the drizzle. Joe watched him all the way to the corner, where he cut up the avenue and disappeared in darkness past the old hotel.

JOE HURRIED BACK TO THE FRONT OF THE BENCH, searching for Garr up and down the street. Not even a dog or cat stirred. Joe sat down, hunched over and looked at his watch. Midnight, some seconds past and then a minute. Well, it looked as if Garr had forgotten. But, really, no harm done.

Joe squirmed and suddenly saw a folded slip of paper beneath the bench behind his feet. It looked fresh, like it had just fallen between the wrought-iron slabs of the bench.

Joe reached down, picked it up, unfolded it and flinched. A hundred-dollar bill was hiding some writing. Joe thumbed the bill aside and read: "Sorry, Joe. If you're not gone in a half-hour, I'll have to take you in. Better, do that yourself and start over. See you in another twenty years. Same time, same place. Garr Shaefer." ●

Noiselessly he went to the bed. He raised the knife, brought it down . . . .

TAKE TWO

by STEPHEN MERTZ

MINERA PARKED THE RENTAL CAR A HALF BLOCK AWAY and approached the house on foot. He moved cautiously; one with the night. The house slumbered darkly in the 2 a.m. quiet, as did the suburban neighborhood around it. Minera leaned close and checked the address beside the front door. It matched the address after the name that he'd located in the phone directory. He had found Julie Carstairs. Now all he had to do was kill her.

He began to reconnoiter the house, moving around the corner to the side, deftly skirting shrubbery that was an inky blur in the darkness.

Until twelve years ago, Minera had been a killer for the local Mob. He had been the best hit man in the city. Slick. Silent. Deadly. He would take any contract and deliver. He was at the top of his profession. Or he had been, that is, until that night twelve years ago when he'd executed the contract on some nowhere restaurant owner named Carstairs. They'd made Minera use a backup on that one, an oldtimer named Juggsy from the Terronova days, for chrissake, who should have been put out to pasture years ago.

Minera hadn't liked it from the start. But you don't argue with a Don, so he took the old guy along. And sure enough, Juggsy blew the whole damn thing. They'd wasted Carstairs in the back of the restaurant late one night after business hours and had been making a fast exit when they'd heard a noise from behind and below a counter. It had been the dead guy's fourteen-year-old daughter and she'd seen the whole thing. Minera had been about to blow her away right between the eyes when that goddamn Juggsy had gone sentimental and knocked Minera's gun up at the last moment. Then it had been too late. People were pounding the door down from outside.

So the kid had lived. Yeah, she'd lived, all right. She had lived to point her finger at Minera and Juggsy in a court of law. The oldtimer had gone to the chair, the dumb sucker. But he'd been tired. He'd seemed almost glad when he heard the verdict. Minera's lawyers had been slicker. He'd drawn twenty to life, and he'd served twelve of them. And every day of every year he had sworn to himself that some day, some way, he would waste the little brat whose testimony had sent him up.

THERE WAS THE PALE SQUARE OF A LIGHTED WINDOW along the side of the house that hadn't been visible from the street. He moved toward it, the newly purchased rubber-soled shoes tredding silently on the mowed lawn. As he moved, Minera's right hand slid out from his jacket pocket. His wrist snapped expertly and a six-inch blade glinted in the light from the window. He would make it quick and silent. Then he would be gone. And a debt would be settled.

He had big plans, once his personal matter was taken care of. He'd busted out of prison last night with two other guys and they'd all immediately split off in separate directions. Minera planned to look up his old employers. Tonight would prove that he had lost none of his touch during his twelve years out of circulation. Plastic surgery, a new identity — the Mob could buy him that and he'd be back in business, bigger than before.

He reached the window, crouched and peered with one eye over the corner of the sill. A young woman in a houserobe was just entering the room — a bedroom — and reaching for a lightswitch. Minera had only seconds to identify her, but it was enough. It was her, all right. Julie Carstairs had grown into a beautiful woman since Minera had last seen her, twelve years ago in that courtroom. Strong, intelligent eyes in a good looking face, and a nice figure, too. Then she flicked the lightswitch and the room was pitched into total darkness. The window was open slightly, and he could hear her crawl into bed with a yawn.

She was alone. Good. It would be best to slice her after she was asleep. There would be no noise then.

He started to lower himself to wait there below and beside the window when his heel snapped a twig. He froze, not even breathing — but the night insects continued to chirp and peep without interruption in the blackness around him. Minera smiled and lowered himself the rest of the way. To the insects — to the woman — that snapped twig was just another sound of a normal night.

MINERA REMAINED MOTIONLESS FOR THE NEXT HOUR. He wondered idly how Julie Carstairs had spent the last twelve years. What had she done with her life? Not that it mattered, really. Whatever she had become, whatever her life was about, it was all going to end in the next few minutes with one swipe of the blade that, Minera was sure, would have all the deadly proficiency he'd ever had. He should have wasted the brat that night behind her father's restaurant. But this would be Take Two, like they said in the movies. There would be no Juggsy to mess things up.

When an hour had passed, Minera rose, shielded his eyes to the

glass and tired to peer into the bedroom through the window. But he could see nothing. The absence of the moon that had aided him in his approach now worked against him. He couldn't see a thing in there. But he didn't need to. He'd been listening, and he hadn't heard a sound from the partly open window. She was still in there. Still alone.

He set the knife gently on the ledge and lifted the window with both hands in a smooth fluid motion. The window rose without a sound. Minera picked up the knife, balancing it lightly in his hand. He could hear Julie's steady, rhythmic breathing in there. She was sound asleep. It would be easy.

He entered through the window, into the room, toward where he remembered seeing the bed. He was noiseless, but adrenaline pumped through him. He brought up the knife.

Now, you runny-mouthed bitch! his mind screamed.

The blade started downward.

THE COUNTER ATTACK DIDN'T COME FROM THE AREA of the bed at all, but from his left. It caught him full force; totally by surprise. A flurry of movement enveloped him out of the gloom. One leg was kicked out from under him and two iron-hands clamped around his wrist and twisted, strong and fast, until the knife flew from his grip. Then he was pulled forward and fulcrummed over someone's bent back and sent flying until he smashed, upside down, into the nearest wall that shuddered under his impact.

He collapsed ungracefully into a heap on the floor, stunned, not sure which way was up or down and hurting over every inch of his body. And in that millisecond he knew that he had been taken. That he *had* lost the touch. *She'd heard that damn snapping twig an hour ago and she'd been as silent as he thought he'd been when she'd slid off the bed and spent that hour in the shadows, waiting for him!*

The bedroom lights blazed with a sudden brilliance, and Minera looked up to find himself staring down the widest bore of the biggest handgun that he'd ever seen. The gun was held by Julie Carstairs, who still wore her robe and was sighting in on Minera down an extended arm. Minera felt sweat beading down from his hairline. He did not move.

Julie Carstairs used her free left hand to dial a number on her bedside phone while she kept her intruder covered, and in the next second Minera had the answer to something that he'd wondered about earlier.

The .38 Police Special never wavered from his forehead as Julie spoke into the receiver. "Dispatcher? This is Detective Carstairs from Homicide. I've just apprehended a fugitive in my home." ●

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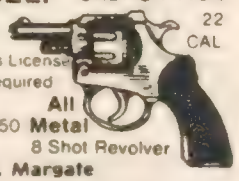

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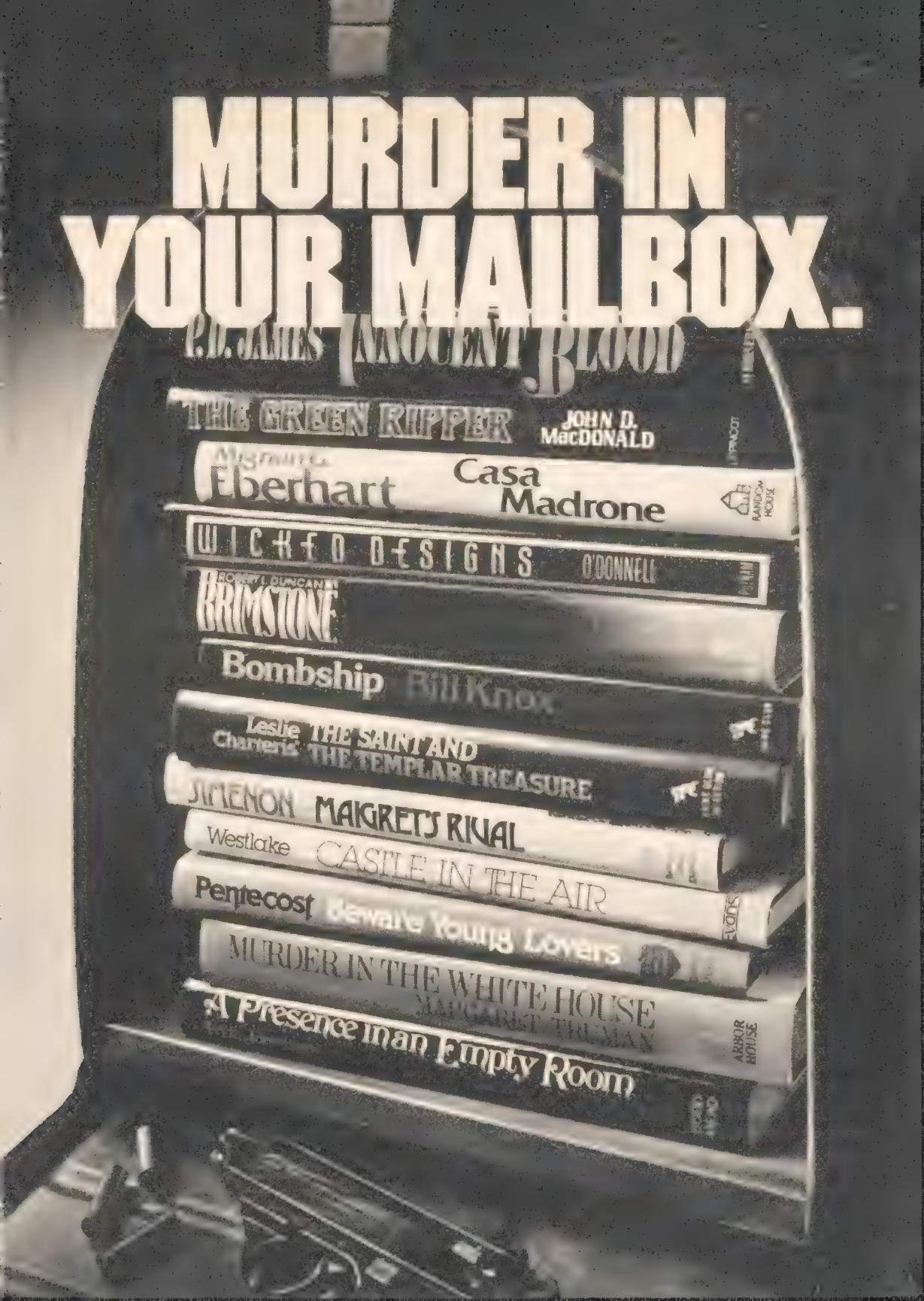
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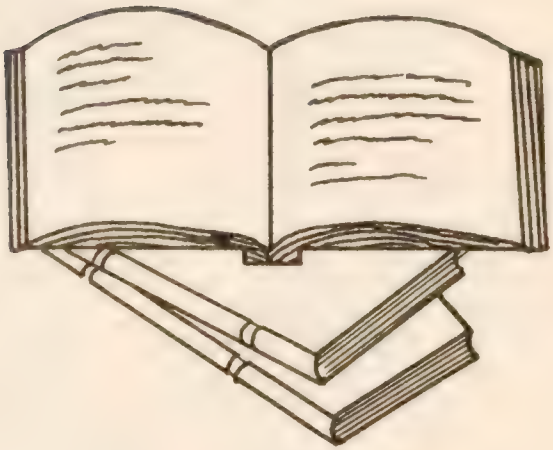

BOOK REVIEWS

by JOHN BALL

There are many talented ladies who write British murder mysteries, including such much praised authors as P.D. James and Christiana Brand, but we must confess a particular delight in the works of Catherine Aird. This remarkably gifted story teller, whom we have never had the pleasure of meeting, is the creator of Inspector Sloan, who is very much like many other similar police officials in literature,

and of Constable Crosby, who is as original a personality as Harpo Marx.

The most recent of Miss Aird's books to come to hand is *Some Die Eloquent,* freshly available from Bantam in paperback. When a spinster nearing sixty dies from what appear to be natural causes, no one is concerned until it is discovered that she left an astonishingly large bank account, one she had had no visible means of acquiring. Highly recommended. After you have enjoyed this one, Miss Aird has also given us *Murder Among the Ruins*. Thirty years after the bombing of London a strange body appears and we are off to the races again. Also a very fine, most entertaining work. The hard covers of these works are done by Doubleday; the Bantam reprints are a modest $2.25 each.

☆ ☆ ☆

Speaking of British mysteries in paperback, Sergeant Cribb, who is currently making such a hit on the fine series *Mystery!* is available to his fans in Peter Lovesey's *Abracadaver*. Dodd Mead did the hard cover on this one; now it is available in paperback from Penguin at $2.95.

☆ ☆ ☆

Dodd Mead, a firm that has many fine mystery authors, also was the first to offer Michael Innes' very enjoyable *The Ampersand Papers* in hardback; now Penguin offers the paperback at $2.50. This sounds like a spy story, but it isn't; it concerns some possible lost works by Shelley and Byron that may or may not be among some old family papers. We noted this one when it first came out; it deserves an encore.

☆ ☆ ☆

Alan Scholefield, who gave us *Venom*, is back with *The Berlin Blind.* Again, not a spy story despite the fact that Berlin is a seemingly irresistible target for this subgenre. This new work is a tale of terrorism and personal vengeance by a man who was pushed too far. There are flashbacks to the Berlin of wartime; the picture of life there during the final weeks of World War II are chilling and not for the faint hearted, but they are certainly highly realistic. There is a super villain, of

course, and a group of terrorists that are all too real. (Morrow and Co., $8.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

The *Orient Express* is something like *Star Trek*; the public has refused to let either one of them die. Jean Paul Remy now offers *Compartment East*, which is subtitled *Love and Adventure on the Orient Express*. An elderly diplomat recalls the adventures, and the ladies, of his youth in a series of separate episodes strung together by a thin story line. The *Orient Express* is not as prominent as the title would suggest, and there are other trains that steam in and out of these pages, but despite a slow pace and detailed development, the author has created a work that is more than hard to put down. There are crimes and murders, but mostly you will follow the protagonist through his various adventures with the trains, with the crimes a secondary attraction. (Morrow and Co., $13.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Richard Lockridge has been writing mysteries for lo these many years, by himself and with his late wife Frances (Remember Mr. and Mrs. North?) His latest offering is *The Old Die Young*, a story of murder in the theater with Lt. Shapiro and Detective Cook of the N.Y.P.D. on the trail. This is one of those books wherein there are many interviews and much running about without a great deal of action, but it isn't needed. Mr. Lockridge is a pro to the tips of his typewriter keys and, bless him for it, he has a special gift for keeping all of his people sorted out in the reader's mind. (Lippincott, $9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Exceptionally good entertainment in a unique setting is Robert Barnard's *Death in a Cold Climate*. This one takes place in Norway, where the author resides. Raymond Chandler defined a good mystery as one that is worth reading even if the end is missing. This is such a book. The writing is very superior and the policeman in the case is outstanding. You can't possibly go wrong with this one. (Scribner's, $8.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

We tried very hard to get interested in Caroline Crane's *The Girls Are Missing*, but it was something of a struggle. In a fine scene two young girls find a body in the woods near their home. The police chief himself takes charge of the investigation, a most unusual procedure even in a small community, although Hillary Waugh's Chief Friendly is one of the best. Miss Crane, however, does not seem to generate the involvement that makes Waugh's work so outstanding. This one is mostly for the ladies; quite possibly they may find it more engaging than we did. (Dodd Mead, $8.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

For some time Alan Hunter has been writing his Superintendent Gently mysteries and developing a wide following in England. Now Walker and company has brought us *The Honfleur Decision* which, again, is not a spy story but an account of Gently when he tries to go on vacation in France. Obviously Gently is out of his jurisdiction, but the French police are quite good and the whole a real entertainment if not a monument in the literature ($9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Also from Walker is Elizabeth Lemarchand's *Change For the Worst*. This is a British police procedural in the style of many years ago, quite possibly intentionally. The detectives arrive from the Yard and ask questions for 150 pages while we wait for something to happen. Also we must chide Miss Lemarchand for breaking one of the prime rules of the game regarding the identity of her murderer. We can't say more without giving it away, but she should have devised a different solution. ($9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

On the other hand, Walker has covered itself with literary glory by giving us again Edmund Crispin's genuine classic, *The Moving Toyshop*. Gervase Fen is on hand, as would be expected, and he was never in better form. not even in *Buried For Pleasure*. Both of these memorable books are essentials in any good library of mystery fiction; get them while you can. ($9.95) ●

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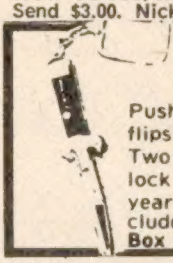

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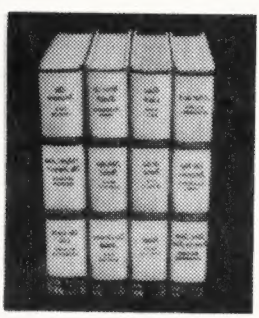

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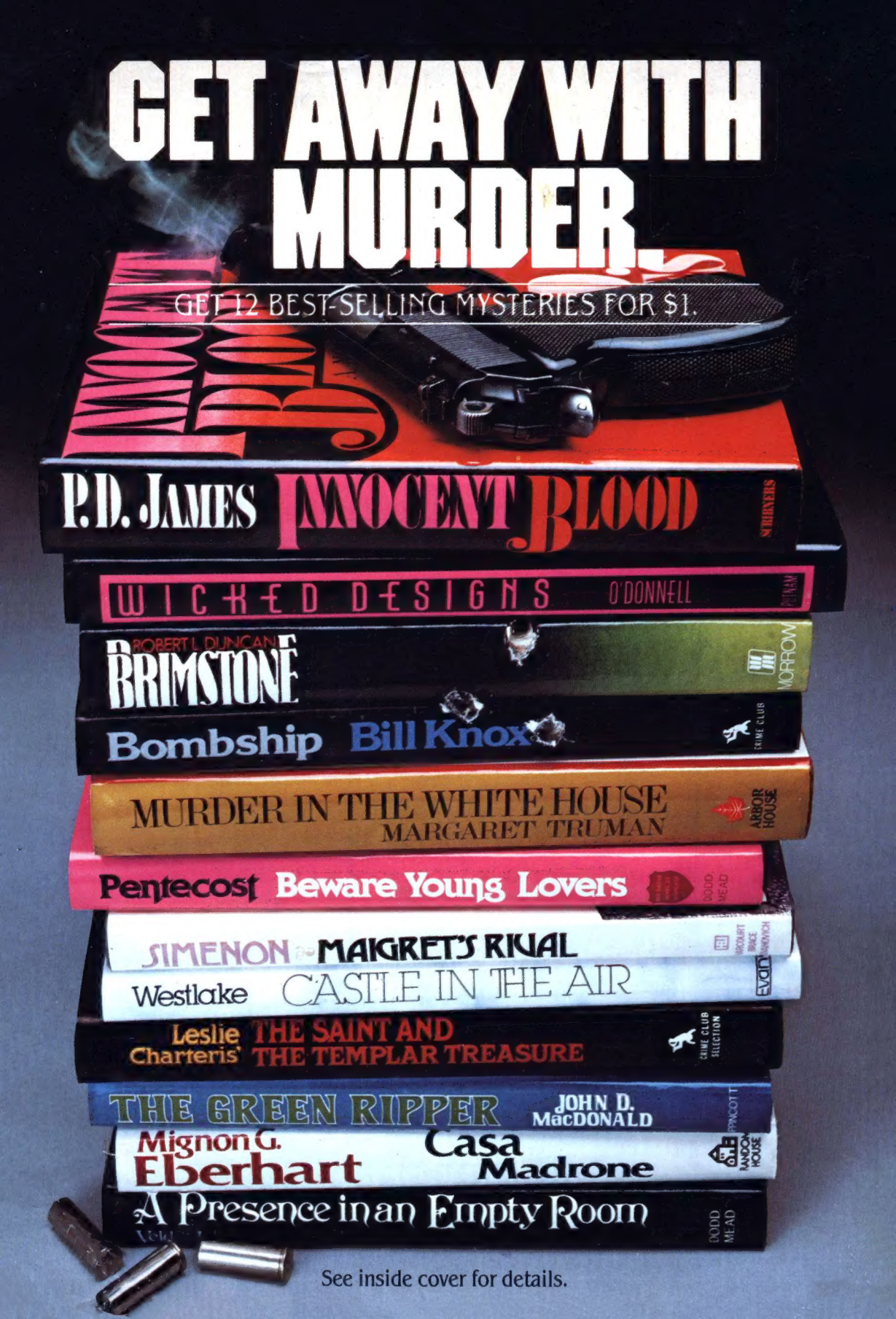
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